EXAMINING THE PRIMARY SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTEES: PERSPECTIVES OF ADOPTIVE PARENTS AND CHILDREN

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Bachelor or Education 1988

Master of Education 2005

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Office of Education Research

Faculty of Education

Queensland University of Technology

2017

Keywords

Attachment, Child development, Intercountry adoption, Intercountry adoptee, International adoption, Pre-adoption experience, School experience, Social constructionism, Trauma

Preface

Values, experiences, and "tuning in"

Reflecting on my 25 years of teaching in schools, I believe that my own life experiences, both as a child who experienced tragedy and a broken home and as a parent of three children who were adopted from overseas, helped me to empathise with children who came from diverse and sometimes difficult family backgrounds. When responding to questions and comments about adoption from people who have little knowledge or experience in the area, I often find myself pondering over this notion of "difference" and the influence of one's own cultural and life experiences on one's perceptions of others. How people understand difference is an important consideration for this study. Carrington (2006, p. 32) states that "teachers tend to be unaware of their beliefs and values and how they impact on their practice." This lack of awareness can inadvertently influence teaching practice in ways that exclude or marginalise children in schools.

When my daughter was in Year 2 at school, a new girl to the class said to me "You're not her mother. You don't look like her." In his prep year, my son came home and said he was sad at school because other boys teased him about having a "flat nose". Both children are still frequently asked by other children and adults alike, "Is that your real brother?" or "... real sister?" In Year 3, my daughter came home with an assignment task: "Draw your family tree and explain it to the class". The teacher made it optional as she knew she had children from diverse backgrounds in her class. After my daughter experienced two anxious weeks and sleepless nights, I made an appointment to see the teacher with her. She explained her dilemma: "I only want to talk about my Australian family." Her teacher (whom my daughter adored, and still does) replied, "I only expect you to talk about your Australian family" and "it's optional. You don't have to do it." My daughter explained that she didn't want to be singled out by not doing the task and added, "What if the other kids ask me questions about the people (family) in the Philippines and why they didn't keep me?" Her teacher was obviously saddened that she had not quite "tuned in" to my daughter's bigger concerns and perhaps had not considered alternatives to a fairly

traditional curriculum task that might cater better for all children's backgrounds and needs.

At secondary school, my daughter experienced a new level of adolescent discomfort in relation to her adoption experience. In her third week, with no "old friends" from primary school in her class, an assignment task asked her to develop and present her life story titled, "All About Me". Clearly, the goal was to help students get to know one another; however, her discomfort was palpable as, once again, she was required to share her life story with a room full of virtual strangers.

Parents as advocates at school

Over the years, as an adoptive parent, teacher, and teacher educator, I felt it natural to initiate discussions with teachers. I would regularly provide information to my children's teachers to raise awareness about age-appropriate adoption language and potential school issues for children in adoptive families. Other adoptive parents have shared with me their families' experiences at school, including their ability or inability to locate and provide helpful information to teachers. Like me, many parents initiate meetings with new teachers at the beginning of each year to inform them about potential adoption-related issues that may arise for their children and to provide reading materials. Some co-present "talks" with their children to the class about their children's birth country to increase understanding and to support their children in talking about adoption. Some parents have shared that advocating for their children is something they feel comfortable doing. Others find this difficult and at times frustrating, having to convince teachers that there may in fact be issues associated with their children's pre-adoption and adoption experience to consider.

Education policy

Accordingly, I began to consider the policy and direction of our education system around issues of inclusivity and diversity, supportive schools and classrooms, collaborative partnerships and intercultural understanding, and wondered how much was reality and how much rhetoric. I understood that, ideally, inclusive schools are places where parents, students and teachers work together in meaningful ways, but also believed, as Carrington (2006, p. 26) states, that "the nature of the involvement of families is, in many schools, superficial." I understood that inclusive schools should be engaging and supportive places for all students that "value, celebrate and respond to diversity" (Department of Education and the Arts, [DETA], 2005, p. 1). I

wondered how teachers in this country, predominantly from middle-class Australian backgrounds, could possibly conceive of all manner of difference that exists in our country, to truly understand and respectfully respond to the diversity in their classes. How, for example, can they be expected to know about the impact of early attachment disruption and trauma on adoptees' success at school? How can they understand the effect that language choice or curriculum design may have on these children when they may have had no specific training or even conversations around these concerns?

Growing awareness and further research

I became the Post-Adoption Resources Co-ordinator for the International Adoptive Families of Queensland (IAFQ, 2012-2014) and participated in stakeholders' meetings run by Adoption Services Queensland (ASQ) and Post Adoption Support Queensland (PASQ). In 2012, I undertook facilitator training in the W.I.S.E. Up! Program[1] in the United States and trained a team of qualified adoptive parents (with a collective background in Primary, Secondary and ESL Education, Occupational Therapy and Psychology), to co-facilitate the program for parents and children in Queensland. Over the past three years we have delivered W.I.S.E Up! workshops in metropolitan and regional areas of the state. I could see the value and opportunity in combining my roles as teacher, preservice teacher educator and researcher to examine the school experience of intercountry adoptees from the perspectives of the children and their parents.

There have been some helpful resources for teachers and parents developed in Australia or adapted from research overseas. However, to date, there is no known research which integrates empirical data and the recommendations from the literature to provide a consultative model for supporting the children, their parents and teachers in the educational context. This is an area in need of further research and it is hoped that this study adds to this space.

[1] The W.I.S.E. Up! Program is a resilience training workshop for adoptive parents and children. Developed in the United States by the Centre for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.), it teaches children and parents practical strategies for responding to comments and questions about adoption and the family's adoption experience.

Abstract

Intercountry adoptees represent a minority group in Australian schools which is under-represented in educational research, in teacher training and in professional development programs. School personnel may therefore lack knowledge, understanding or personal experience in regard to the possible impact of attachment disruption and complex trauma on children's development. This qualitative study examined the diverse primary school experiences of intercountry adoptees, from the perspectives of adoptive parents and children in relation to these and other school-related issues.

Phase One of the study collected data using focus group interviews with adoption and support personnel and adoptive parents. Key themes were identified and informed further in-depth investigation in Phase Two, a multicase study of 10 adoptive families. This phase collected data from parents through semi-structured interviews and documents, and from their children's conversations, drawings and text. The study had a multi-dimensional theoretical framework which included childhood development, attachment and trauma theories, and social constructionism.

Findings revealed generally positive perceptions of intercountry adoptees' school experience, but highlighted the difficulties experienced by a number of children across various developmental domains, which was particularly relevant for children adopted closer to school age. This is especially significant in light of the changing trends in Intercountry Adoption which show that a higher proportion of children adopted internationally are in this category.

This study contributes to a more holistic theoretical understanding of the nature and implications of atypical early life experience on children's development and the implications for school administrators and educators. The study findings inform an effective method of inquiry for working with children from diverse backgrounds. It also reconceptualises a more consultative model for managing the intercountry adoptee's school experience which makes better use of available social resources and places the child at the centre of policy and practice considerations in schools.

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List of Abbreviations

AICAN	Australian Intercountry Adoption Network
ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
ACF	Australian Childhood Foundation
AdSSS	Adoption and Specialist Support Services
AGD	Attorney-General's Department
AIFS	Australian Institute of Family Studies
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
AITSL	Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership
AVT	Advisory Visiting Teacher
BICS	Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills
CALP	Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency
DCCSDS	Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services (Queensland)
DET	Department of Education and Training (Queensland)
DHHS	Tasmanian Department of Health and Human Services
HccH	Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in respect of Intercountry Adoption
HRSCHFS	House of Representatives Standing Committee on Human and Family Services
IAA	Intercountry Adoption Australia
IAFQ	International Adoptive Families of Queensland
IAV	Intercountry Adoption Victoria
ICA	Intercountry adoption
NAAW	National Adoption Awareness Week
PASS	Post Adoption Support Service
PASQ	Post Adoption Support Queensland
WISC-5	Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children – Fifth Edition

Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signature:

Date: 1 March, 2017

Acknowledgements

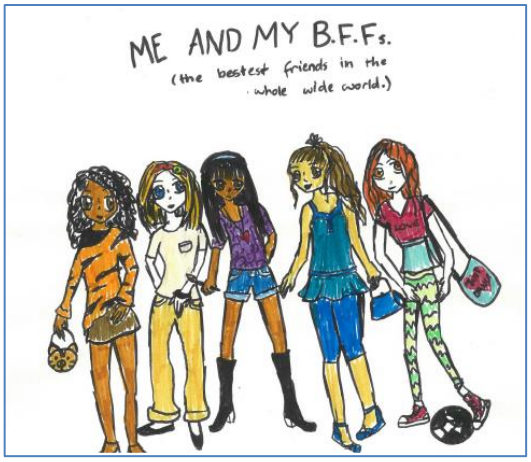
I would like to thank my supervision team, Professor Suzanne Carrington, Dr Derek Bland and Dr Judith Howard for your mentoring throughout my 4 ½ year doctoral journey. I have been privileged to be guided by your expertise and challenged by your questions and redirections. Your faith in me to direct and manage my research allowed me the flexibility and autonomy to work not only as a student but as a professional and a colleague while honing my skills along the way. Thank you to the QUT review panel for your invaluable feedback on my thesis: Associate Professor Kerryann Walsh, Dr Radha Iyer and Dr Julie Dillon-Wallace, and to the external thesis examiners. Thank you also to my colleagues at Caboolture campus of QUT: Head of Campus, Mr Robert Craig for your ongoing support of my research requirements; the expert library and IT staff for your technical assistance; and to my fellow academics for your sustaining conversations and encouragement.

I am grateful to the beautiful children and generous adult participants in this study; particularly for the trust you placed in me to sensitively convey your experiences. Thank you also to the wider adoption community, including adoption and post adoption services personnel who supported this research. It is my vision that together our work will contribute to the best possible educational outcomes, and happy, successful experiences, for all children who join their families through adoption or other challenging early life beginnings. I'd like to also give a very special thank you to my "big brother" Les, for your encouragement and ongoing support, throughout all my years of education.

Last, but by no means least, words cannot express my heartfelt thanks and appreciation to my husband, Paul, for his unwavering support and encouragement, and for being mum and dad when necessary to our three amazing children. Criza, Christian and Liezel, I am so proud of you. Thank you for being patient, giving and equally proud of "mummy's study". Your drawings and conversations over the years about school and family have been inspirational.

Dedication

While my children were not participants in this study, they helped me trial the use of drawings and conversations to identify their school experiences. I dedicate this thesis to them, to their friends who share a similar life journey, and to birth parents who, through their sacrifice, allow adoptive parents the privilege and honour of loving and raising these beautiful children.



Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Australian Government policy requires teachers to "sharpen their focus" on issues of equity, social justice and citizenship and to ensure successful outcomes and opportunities for all learners in a global society: no small feat considering the diversity which characterises many Australian classrooms today. Carrington (2006, p. 32) states that "teachers tend to be unaware of their beliefs and values and how they impact on their practice". The disparity between the predominantly white, middle class backgrounds of many teachers and the diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds of their students could provide a reason for this (Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000; Santoro & Allard, 2005). In the absence of lived experience, the media also plays a significant role in influencing the lens through which "ordinary people", including teachers, may perceive their students and families (Willing, 2009, p. 241).

This research aims to raise awareness with educational professionals, post-adoption support groups and other interested parties about the experiences and needs of primary school-aged children adopted from overseas countries by Australian families. The outcomes of this research will recommend practices and collaborative partnerships which may best support these children at school.

1.2 CHAPTER ORGANISATION

This chapter outlines the background and significance of the research in relation to the global and Australian contexts and highlights considerations for the researcher as both "insider" and "outsider" in the field of investigation. The purpose of the study is presented, and intercountry adoption is identified as a diversity issue requiring consideration in Australian schools. Definitions are provided of the key terms used, and the research questions are introduced.

1.2.1 Background

While teacher education programs and national curriculum guidelines now incorporate teaching for diversity, adoption is not generally a specific area under

consideration. Donalds (2012, p. 6) argues that adoptees as a population are "often overlooked and their problems are often minimized." Meese (2002, p. 56) also explains that while little is known about how intercountry adoptees do at school, "it is clear that adoption will affect these children throughout their lifetime". Adoptive parents may be in the best position to collaborate with teachers and other education professionals about the needs of their children, to ensure sensitivity and understanding about adoption issues and how they may impact on these children at school (Meese, 2002; Ng, 2006; Schoettle, 2003). Some adoptive parents, however, may not have the knowledge or experience themselves to talk confidently with teachers about adoption in general or their children's needs specifically. Further research which captures the lived experiences of school-aged adoptees and their parents will help to determine the extent to which the issues raised in the existing literature reflect Australian adoptees' experiences. It may also stimulate conversations and suggest mechanisms for ongoing support for these and other vulnerable groups at school.

1.2.2 Global context

Globally, early research into the field of intercountry adoption (ICA) focused on the psychological adjustment of children, including attachment disruption and trauma (including grief and loss) (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1998; Brodzinsky, 2006) in response to the increasing popularity of the legal adoption of children post-World War II (Donalds, 2012; Fronek, 2009, 2012; Murphy, Pinto, & Cuthbert, 2010). Following the Korean and Vietnam Wars (1950s, 1970s), thousands of children (fathered by American soldiers or orphaned following these conflicts) were adopted by American families. The number of international adoptions in the United States, Canada and Britain dramatically increased in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the increased availability of children from Eastern Europe following the overthrow and execution of Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu (Gindis, 2005, 2008; Meese, 2002). It was then that the world first glimpsed disturbing media images of "tens of thousands of abandoned children suffering abuse and neglect in Romania's orphanages" (Sullivan, 2012), sparking a renewed commitment to international adoptions from these countries. Since the 1990s, China's preference for male children under the one-child

family policy also added to the increase in the adoption of baby girls from China to the United States (Settles & Sheng, 2008).

During the last decade, significant research has been conducted in the United States, Britain and some Scandanavian countries (Gray, 2009) on the impact of institutional deprivation on children's post-adoptive behaviour and adjustment (Gindis, 2008; Judge, 2004; Merz & McCall, 2010; Rutter, Beckett et al., 2005; Rutter, Colvert et al., 2007). Furthermore, research has begun to highlight the outcomes of institutionalisation on children's cognitive and language development as well as other educational issues including school performance (Gindis, 2005; Glennen, 2002, 2006, 2007; Meese, 2002; van Ijzendoorn, Juffer, & Poelhuis, 2005).

1.2.3 Australian context

In Australia, adoption research in the last decade has largely represented historical, political, psychosocial and sociocultural perspectives, in particular past adoption practices and lessons to be learned from these (Cuthbert, 2012; Cuthbert & Spark, 2009; Fronek, 2009, 2012; Fronek & Cuthbert, 2012; Kenny, Higgins, Soloff, & Sweid, 2012; Willing, Fronek, & Cuthbert, 2012; Young, 2012). Australian research has failed, however, to sufficiently address the impact of pre- or post-adoption experience on this group of children at school, with no empirical evidence yet found which links research abroad to the educational outcomes of school-aged adoptees in Australia. One reason for this may be the falling number of adoptions in Australia in general, and ICAs in particular, reportedly resulting from changes in legislation and social trends and attitudes. In contrast, the increased use of alternative legal orders in Australia has seen tens of thousands of children in Australia entering foster care or other forms of out-of-home care (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2013a; 2016; see Appendix A). The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Human and Family Services (HRSCHFS, 2005, p. 7) report on the inquiry into the adoption of children from overseas argues that "one of the reasons for this inaction is that state and territory welfare departments focus their resources on children with problems and dysfunctional families within Australia". It could be argued then that research efforts are also focused there.

The Senate's second report on the inquiry into children in institutional or out-of-home care confirmed the evidence that children entering care have increasingly complex problems "exacerbated by multiple placements, multiple changes to

caseworkers, lack of adequate after-care services; and children returning to abusive situations" and this is a genuine concern for which solutions are needed (Australian Government Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 2005, pp. 108-109). A joint study by the Victorian branches of Anglicare and Wesley Mission, involving 199 Victorian carers and 21 teachers, reported that children in care demonstrated a significantly higher degree of functional difficulties as a result of health or behavioural conditions and were at a much greater risk of emotional and behavioural adjustment problems than Australian children of the same age (0-17) generally (Wise, Pollock, Mitchell, Argus, & Farquhar, 2010, p. 6). The eleven recommendations of the report included the provision for increased support for children experiencing "severe emotional and behavioural disturbance, the increased ability of schools to respond to students who demonstrate trauma-related behaviour and the introduction of a co-ordinated approach to the assessment and planning of these children's educational experience across care and education systems" (Wise et al., p. 7). It is expected that further empirical research linking the findings from decades of research abroad to the socio-emotional, behavioural and cognitive experiences of intercountry adoptees in Australian schools will assist all adoptive families, carers and education professionals to support these and other vulnerable children at school. This is confirmed by Gunnar, Bruce and Grotevant (2000, p. 678) who state that "the study of internationally adopted children is not only important in its own right but it may also shed light on the developmental outcomes of other at-risk populations that encounter early adverse life circumstances."

1.3 CLARIFYING TERMINOLOGY

Some terms used in the study of adoption can be confusing to the reader. For clarity and consistency, some additional distinguishing explanations are needed.

The term *Intercountry adoption*, often called international or overseas adoption, refers to the adoption of children from another country of origin who are legally available for adoption (AIHW, 2012). *Transracial adoption* refers to the adoption of children from another race or ethnicity. This is a subgroup of both local (sometimes called domestic) and intercountry adoption. Transracial adoption is often discussed as a separate category, due to the unique cultural issues faced by adoptive families (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2010). According to Zamostny, O'Brien, Baden and Wiley (2003), intercountry adoption maybe transracial but is

always transcultural. *Race* is a term generally used to classify people according to geographic, physical or genetically inherited characteristics (for example, tribal affiliations, nationalities, language, skin colour and tone, hair colour and texture and facial features) (Hays, 2008, p. 11). *Culture*, however, is a more general, socially acquired and inclusive term which encompasses, among other things, traditions (for example, histories and holidays), behaviours (for example, language), religious beliefs and practices. Such aspects are passed on from generation to generation within a particular context (Hays, p. 14). Confusion in terminology sometimes occurs, and inconsistencies are often found in publications (Bhopal, 2004).

For the purpose of this research, the term *Intercountry adoption* or ICA will be used. The specific focus of this study is on children who were born in another country and are racially "different" to their adoptive parents; however, it may also include some transracial children who were adopted locally within Australia.

1.4 PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

This research investigated the school experiences of 10 adoptive families through a multicase study which captures perspectives of the children and their parents. It identifies key themes emerging from focus groups which informed in-depth semi-structured interviews with parents and conversational interviews with children. Children's drawings were used to prompt and stimulate discussion, and verbal and written explanatory text added to drawings provided additional data from the children. Documents contributed by most parents provide supporting data. Research findings lead to recommendations for the development of a "Consultative Partners" Model for managing the school experience of intercountry adoptees in primary school, whereby the children's needs are integral to policy and practice considerations. While the focus is on intercountry adoptees, recommendations include suggestions for teacher education and professional development in the areas of cultural and transcultural competence and trauma-informed practice in schools which support a broader range of children from diverse and/or complex backgrounds.

1.5 CURRENT AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION

According to S. Chambers (personal communication, 6 May, 2013), Manager of the AIHW Adoption Australia data collection:

> [T]here is a paucity of Australian research or data on post-adoption outcomes (including adoption disruption and adoptees' educational attainment). A key reason for this is that once an adoption is finalised, adoptees from a legal (and, therefore, administrative data collection) perspective are considered no different from other Australian children and are therefore not readily identifiable. Compounding this further is the fact that national adoptions data are collected in a de-identified, aggregated manner meaning it is not possible to use data linkage methods to try to locate these children in other databases (such as Child Protection, Health or Education databases).

In spite of the lack of post-adoption data available, national and some state government departments are now providing targeted support to address the needs of adoptees and children in permanent care (Victorian State Government, 2012). In the last decade, with the growing number of children in Australia being looked after by people other than their birth parents, there has been a growing body of research into the interplay between brain development, trauma and relationship disruption and the impact of this on children's physical (brain and body), social (relationships, behaviour) and emotional (emotions, behaviour) well-being as well as children's ability to learn effectively (e.g., poor memory, attention, concentration) at school (Australian Childhood Foundation, [ACF], 2010). As a result of this research there are now guidelines published for working with traumatised children (ACF, 2009, 2010; Downey, 2007; Post Adoption Support Service, [PASS], 2013).

Furthermore, the Australian Government through the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) acknowledges the diversity of "family types" in Australia and the need for further research culminating in "rigorous data" to enable government and community agencies to deliver effective integrated services to support diverse families and enhance resilience and well-being (AIFS, 2012, pp. 6-8). The difficulty, however, lies in the "overlaps and gaps" between government services and agencies, funding sources, levels of responsibility and the ability to effectively co-ordinate services and make them available at the point of need (AIFS, p. 13) .

The South Australian and Victorian Governments have responded by attempting to "upskill" teachers to better support children from diverse and often traumatic backgrounds. For example, "SMART: Strategies for Managing Abuse Related Trauma" is a set of on-line professional development modules available at

no cost to teachers, developed by the Australian Childhood Foundation and funded by the South Australian Government Department of Education and Children's Services, as a part of its "keeping them safe" child protection reform agenda (ACF, 2009). This program seeks to enhance the capacity of school and early childhood staff to effectively respond to the needs of children who have experienced abuse and trauma. While this program targets children in out-of-home care, the lessons learned are also applicable to the early background of attachment disruption and trauma experienced by intercountry adoptees. Another on-line resource published by the Child Safety Commissioner, Victoria, titled "Calmer classrooms: A guide to working with traumatised children", encourages teachers to learn about the impact of trauma on children's education and to develop positive relationship-based skills which will help their students to heal and to succeed at school (Downey, 2007).

Print resources have also been developed by the South Australian Government Post Adoption Support Service in response to questions and requests for support from teachers in relation to the challenges experienced by adoptees at school (personal communication, Couper, 29 January, 2013; PASS, 2013). Similarly, initiatives such as National Adoption Awareness Week provided the impetus for the NAAW Education Group (made up of interested Principals, teachers, adoptive parents, adoptees and child advocates) to collaborate on the production of an "Education Kit" (Harapin, 2010) for teachers (prior to the implementation of the Australian Curriculum) and a website which aims to "raise community awareness, encourage reform, and empower all Australians to engage with issues affecting adoption" (National Adoption Awareness Week, [NAAW], 2013).

While resources and programs exist, the question remains, why is there still a lack of understanding by educators around issues which may impact on these children at school? (Baker, 2013; Donalds, 2012; Meese, 2002; Smith & Riley, 2006; Taymans et al., 2008). One reason may be the *ad hoc* manner in which teachers become aware of these resources and training opportunities. Another may be the lack of co-ordination of the delivery of services and information to teachers nationally. In addition, the research which informs some of these resources is based predominantly on American evidence, experiences and contexts (eg. history, statistics, policy) (See Glennen, Groza; Delaney, Becker-Weidman; Gindis cited in PASS, 2013).

Consequently, Australian teachers need to sift, sort and contextualise the information as it applies to the children in their classrooms.

The research from abroad does identify the unique potential challenges for adoptees at school (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2010; Fishman & Harrington, 2007; Meese, 2002; Schoettle, 2003; Smith & Riley, 2006) and it calls for further training of teachers, particularly through preservice teacher education (Baker, 2013; Donalds, 2012; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2010; Taymans et al., 2008). To date, no empirical research has been found which identifies the needs of adoptive children in Australian schools, or which provides a model for managing and supporting their school experience. Further evidence-based research, which is culturally sensitive and engages families and communities, is necessary (AIFS, 2012). This study adds to this space through the following research questions:

1. What are the primary school experiences of intercountry adoptees, from the perspectives of adoptive parents and children?
2. How do the early life experiences of intercountry adoptees impact on their school experience?

1.6 RESEARCH TOPIC AND DESIGN

This research topic is *Examining the school experiences of intercountry adoptees: Perspectives of adoptive parents and children.* This study is framed by a social constructionist paradigm which considers early and contemporary child development theories which highlight the contrast between "typical" and "atypical" development in children who have experienced attachment disruption, trauma and/or neglect in their early years.

This study is designed in two phases. Phase one uses four focus groups (one group of adoption and support workers; three groups of adoptive parents) to identify key issues for further in-depth investigation in the second phase. Phase two comprises a multicase study that collects data from 10 adoptive families (parents and children) through in-depth semi-structured interviews with parents, document analysis, and conversations and drawings completed with children.

Stake's (2006) *multicase study* approach begins with a phenomenon (here, the primary school experience of intercountry adoptees) which is identified from the

outset and uses a small number of accessible cases to explore and illuminate the phenomenon in depth. The combined individual cases thus become an "integrated system" (p. 4) which documents both the "typical" and the "unique" (p. 6) experiences of adoptive families, in order to understand the overall phenomenon.

An *instrumental approach* (Stake, 1995, p. 3) to case study is used to provide insight into broader issues surrounding parents' belief systems, interpersonal relationships between parents and teachers, and identity issues for children. While parents' and children's views are the specific focus of this study, it is acknowledged that later examination of teachers' views would add to these findings.

1.7 RESEARCHER AS "INSIDER AND OUTSIDER"

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011, p. 12) there are no objective observations of the lives of others, "only observations socially situated in the worlds of – and between – the observer and the observed". Simons (2009, p. 4) argues that the role of "self" in a qualitative case study must be "transparent", requiring more than a description of its "inescapable influence in a preface". An adoptive parent and researcher herself, Gray (2009, pp. 31-32) clarifies my subjective position which places me as both an insider and an outsider to the participants in the study. As a white, middle-class mother (Gray, 2009) of three Filipino-Australian children, I am an insider to the ICA experience. My children's school experiences may reflect, in part, the experiences of other adoptees in this project. Similarly, my own experiences of sharing adoption-related issues with my children's teachers may be similar to some other parents' experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Additionally, my experience as a teacher in schools and a preservice teacher educator provides me with an existing platform for considering what is, could, or should be in terms of inclusive practices in schools. According to Gergen (2009), however, from a social constructionist standpoint, gathering empirical evidence means literally to be "guided by experience" (p. 58) and so my own experiences will necessarily reflect my values. To state otherwise would be misleading (p. 59).

Like many other adoptive parents, I experienced the seemingly never-ending rollercoaster ride towards realising the dream of becoming a family which included children. The personal highs and lows of exploring options and researching possibilities, the decision to adopt, and the complex, lengthy and often frustrating

adoption processes were par for the course. While carrying out my current research I have also experienced periods of frustration at the critical discourse which defines me as one of the "desperate infertile couples" (Gray, 2009, p. 37), and as one of the many adoptive parents who selfishly "hunger for children" (Fronek & Cuthbert, 2012, p. 439).

According to Fronek's (2009) definition, however, I am a "proponent" of ICA. Although my definition would differ somewhat, my choice of research methods and the conclusions and implications that I draw from the research may indeed be influenced by my own values and experiences, as well as by my desire to allow the voices of those directly affected by the adoption experience to be heard. Stake (1995, p.95) argues that research is not helped by "the presumption of sanitization" or by attempting to make it "appear value free". It is important, however, to explain my position to the reader and ensure that I continuously monitor the impact of my values and experiences on all stages of the research process (Simons, 2009, p.4).

I also need to acknowledge my "outsider" status, that is, my inability to "walk a mile in their shoes" when describing adoptees' experiences. Denzin and Lincoln (2003, p. 25) point out that this may cause a "crisis of representation" which requires "a method of inquiry that moves through successive stages of self-reflection". For example, while shopping in a busy centre in the Philippines with my new son, I experienced the stares and judgement of strangers and the feeling of not belonging. My "invisible status as a white woman in a predominantly white community" (Gray, 2009, p. 33) was replaced with the vulnerable feeling of being "different", exposed to the curiosity and mistrust of strangers. On one occasion, a Filipina woman raced after me as I pushed my son in his pram and screamed, "Is that your baby? Is that your baby?" Her fear that I had stolen him was replaced with smiles when I told her I had just adopted him. For that one frightening and embarrassing moment, I believe I may have caught just a glimpse of how it feels to be exposed to the curiosity and lack of understanding from the general public that intercountry adoptees are regularly exposed to in Australia.

This and other experiences have helped me to realise that the lens that frames my perspectives about the adoption experience may be far removed from the lens through which other parents and children perceive themselves. I am also acutely aware that my pseudo-experiences in the Philippines were short lived, non-

permanent and had no significant long-term effect on me. It is for these reasons that I established protocols for ongoing collaboration with participants during the data collection and transcription stages of the research to ensure accuracy and to avoid misrepresentation or misunderstanding prior to writing the final analysis (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Stake, 1995). To this end I have ensured that my methods of inquiry are rigorous, open to scrutiny and accurately represent the participants' experiences in this project.

1.8 THESIS OUTLINE

This thesis comprises eight chapters. This chapter introduces the study with a global and local context and the purpose of the study. It provides an overview of the research design and the key questions for investigation, and identifies my status in the research. Chapter two reviews historical and contemporary perspectives on adoption and highlights significant issues causing contention and debate which may influence educators' perspectives. Key themes, including pre-adoption experiences, are explored in relation to children's experiences in the social context of school. A summary of the salient issues and implications from the literature serves to inform the theoretical framework for this study. Chapter three exposes the complexity of theorising ICA in school, as it provides a multi-dimensional framework for considering child development, implications of attachment disruption and trauma on development, and social constructionist perspectives that, together, provide a more comprehensive approach to investigating and analysing the issues. Chapter four presents an interpretive qualitative case study design and the methodological and ethical considerations that directed the two phases of the research. Chapter five presents the key themes which emerged from phase one focus groups to inform phase two. Chapter six introduces the individual family cases and highlights their common and diverse experiences through cross-case analysis using the theoretical framework of Chapter three. Chapter seven synthesises the significant findings from phases one and two of the study. Chapter eight identifies the significant contributions of the study (including a model for managing the school experience of intercountry adoptees), suggests implications from the research and makes recommendations for future research imperatives.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 INTRODUCTION AND CHAPTER ORGANISATION

This chapter begins with an overview of the history of adoption in Australia and a brief discussion of the different perspectives on ICA in Australia. This provides a context for considering how history and perspectives may influence understanding of children's adoption experiences. This is followed by two main sections which focus on adoption in relation to the school context. The first section provides a review of adoption literature which identifies key issues which may impact on the children's educational experience. The second section outlines further educational considerations including education professionals' understanding, and suggests some practices and mechanisms which may support the child at school. The chapter conclusion summarises key findings from the literature and implications for this study.

2.2 HISTORY OF ADOPTION IN AUSTRALIA

The history of adoption, including changes in social attitudes, has shaped current perspectives towards local and ICA policy in Australia. The first Australian legislation concerning local adoption (Western Australia, 1896) was intended to "board out" street children into "respectable families" in order to teach them to be "useful" members of society while contributing to the family workload and income (Forket, 2009, p. 25). A comprehensive analysis of Australian newspapers between 1860 and 1940 revealed "essentially a market exchange" with children being the sought-after commodity (Swain, 2012, p. 400)[2]. The term "adopt" signified a permanent arrangement, which obviated the need for weekly support payments to families who took on a child as a working boarder (Forket, 2009; Swain, 2012). By 1935, all Australian states had introduced adoption legislation and the focus shifted to the children's welfare and the aim of securing the emotional bonds and stability of

[2] The earliest article identified from this period read:

WANTED, by a lady and gentleman, an intelligent destitute ORPHAN GIRL, about 10 years old, to adopt as their own. Early application is necessary. Apply by letter to X. Z., Newtown Post Office. *(The Sydney Morning Herald, 1860:8)* (Swain, 2012, p. 401)

the adoptive family. This included the transfer of legal rights from birth parents to adoptive parents (Forket, 2009).

Until the 1970s, adoptions mainly involved babies born to unmarried mothers, peaking in 1971-72 at approximately 10,000 (Kenny, Higgins, Soloff, & Sweid, 2012). Since then, economic, social and legislative factors have significantly influenced the decline in the availability of Australian children for adoption. Such factors include greater acceptance and financial support for single and unmarried mothers; an increase in alternative care order arrangements; day care options for women returning to work; enhanced family planning advice and sex education classes for girls; improved availability and effectiveness of birth control; and the stigma associated with past forced adoption practices (AIHW, 2012; HRSCHFS, 2005; Kenny et al., 2012; D. Martin, 2011).

During the 1970s, other changes also paved the way for official adoption from overseas countries. The White Australia Policy ended and multiculturalism became a focus for policy makers (Fronek, 2009, 2012). Globally, humanitarian responses to World War Two, the Korean and Vietnam Wars and natural disasters have seen global emotional and altruistic responses to the rescue and adoption of dislocated or orphaned children (Fronek, 2009; 2012; Fronek & Cuthbert, 2012; Murphy, Pinto, & Cuthbert, 2010; Selman, 2011; Young, 2012). One highly controversial event, "Operation Babylift", saw Australia's first government-authorised mass adoption of babies from Vietnamese orphanages in April, 1975 (Cook, 1988/89; Fronek, 2009, 2012; A. Martin, 2011; Willing, 2009). While the attendant controversy relating to the validity and long term repercussions of such action ended adoptions from Vietnam, the way was paved for other ICA programs from South Korea and China (Fronek, 2012; McCrohan & Wetterer, 1977; Zigler, 1976).

The other significant event during the 1970s-1990s was the removal of Aboriginal children from their mothers and their subsequent adoption by white Australian families (Cheater, 2009). Historical perspectives of this "stolen generation" have led to "the demonization of the adoption of aboriginal children by white parents" (Cheater, p. 177; see also Read, 1982, 1999). This led to further criticisms that ICA involves "stealing children" from overseas from their families without consent. The prioritising of adopting Indigenous children into an Indigenous community in accordance with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child

Placement Principle (AIHW, 2012) may similarly influence attitudes towards ICA programs.

By the 1980s, the rapid increase in world-wide ICAs generated a multilateral approach to safeguard all parties. The 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of ICAs (HccH) came into force in Australia in 1998 (Hague Conference on Private International Law, 2013; D. Martin, 2011). The aim was to establish consistent international standards and practices for ICAs. Among the Convention's key principles are that the rights of the children are paramount, that adoption should occur only after all other efforts to place the child with their extended family or community are exhausted, and that safeguards are in place to prevent the abduction, sale and trafficking of children (HccH, 2013). Subsequently, the Australian Government proactively reviews the bilateral agreements with other countries to ensure Hague Convention standards are maintained (D. Martin, 2011).

Adoptions in Australia have declined significantly over the last three decades. In 1987-88 there were 1,494 finalised adoptions; 1, 142 in 1990-91; 514 in 2000-01; 339 in 2012-13. In 2014-2015 there were 292 adoptions, including 83 adopted internationally. The 209 adopted from Australia included 56 local (unknown to adoptive parents) and 153 known child adoptions (generally by relatives, carers or step-parents) (AIHW, 2012, pp. 34, 48; 2015, pp. 4, 13-15; Kenny et al., 2012). The main ICA sending countries have changed over time. In 2005-2009, China was the main country of origin. At mid-2015, the majority (94%) were from Taiwan, the Philippines and Thailand. Currently, Australia's open programs include: Bulgaria, Chile, China, Colombia, Hong Kong, Latvia, Philippines, Poland, South Africa, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, and Thailand (Australian Government, 2016). Prior to 28 June, 2012, children were also adopted from Ethiopia (AIHW, 2015, pp. 7, 16). Recently, domestic adoptions have exceeded ICAs, with legislation such as the New South Wales Child Protection Amendment Legislation Bill 2014 making it simpler for authorised carers to adopt children in their long-term care (AIHW, 2015). This continuing trend could provide one reason for the little attention given to ICA research in Australia.

A general trend in international adoption is towards the reduction of infants and an increase in older children and children with special needs being available for

adoption (AIHW, 2015; Selman, 2006, 2010, 2012; see also Appendix B). Gindis (2005, p. 4) explains "this creates a challenge for both the adoptive parents and the school system". This trend is confirmed by Intercountry Adoption Victoria (IAV) in its online ICA Information Kit:

> Over the past decade the profile of children requiring adoption from overseas has changed. Children now are much more likely to be older, have grown up in institutions or cared for by many people or have significant health issues. Children require placement in an adoptive family for complex social reasons most commonly relating to poverty, culture, family expectations, or health problems of the child and/or the parent. Most children requiring adoption through IAV are older than two years of age with a growing need for placement of children four years and older and children with significant special needs (IAV, 2016, p. 4).

An examination of Australian data over the last decade (AIHW, 2012, 2015) shows a decline in the adoption of infants with relative stability in the number of children of school age. In 2014-2015 only 10 percent of children adopted internationally were under 12 months old (AIHW, 2015, p. 19). Clearly, changing trends in ICA have implications for teachers in Australian schools and for the professional guidance they require to support these children.

A significant milestone in Australian adoption research emerged from the Australian Senate Inquiry's report *Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices* and the *Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry*, both released in February, 2012. The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) also conducted a comprehensive study into the full range of adoption circumstances, including those with experiences of "closed" or "forced" adoptions (Kenny et al., 2012, executive summary). Such practices of the post-World War II period (especially 1950s-1970s) resulted from the social stigma surrounding extra-marital pregnancy and the lack of financial support for unwed mothers (Fox News, 2013). Practices included insufficient or misleading information provided to unmarried mothers about the alternatives to adoption and the pressure to consent to adoption while under duress or the influence of drugs (Tasmania, Department of Health and Human Services, [DHHS], 2013). In 2010-2012, most State Government departments delivered public apologies for past forced adoption practices, with a national apology delivered by then Prime Minister Julia Gillard on 21 March, 2013

(Australian Government, 2013b; Department of Communities Child Safety and Disabilty Services [DCCSDS], 2013; DHHS, 2013). These apologies were proffered to publicly acknowledge the impact of past adoption practices on those affected, to accept responsibility for past practices and to aid the process of healing (DHHS, 2013).

At a National Press Club forum on 13 November, 2013 titled "Adoption Crisis Forum", an expert panel led by globally-recognised adoption advocate Deborra-Lee Furness, highlighted the "anti-adoption culture" in Australia, the extreme bureaucratic process surrounding adoption and the need for a "champion" in government to improve adoption processes for the sake of vulnerable children both within Australia and from overseas. Furness called for the government to "double the number of adoptions in half the amount of time", to raise public awareness about adoption and "to bring it out of the shadows and into the light where it belongs" (Australian Broadcasting Commission, [ABC] 2013). A subsequent media release made by Prime Minister Tony Abbott (Abbott, 2013), confirmed the government's support:

> And just because we have made mistakes in the past, is no reason to conclude that we can't do it better in the future. … I am determined the change will happen and within 12 months, things will be different and they will be better.

The Australian Government's acknowledgement of past injustices, as well as its recognition and commitment to improve adoption practices in the future, will impact on the Australian people's perspectives of adoption as a valid means of providing families for children in need.

2.3 CURRENT PERSPECTIVES ON ICA IN AUSTRALIA

Various terms are used in evidence-based research to describe the diverse perspectives on ICA. Fronek (2009, p. 42) refers to "proponent", "opponent" and "non-partisan" networks to describe those who support, oppose or have "less polarised views". Cuthbert (2012, p. 375) refers to "advocates" and "critics" while Peter Boss of Monash University (cited by HRSCFHS, 2005, p. 6) discusses "protagonists" and "opponents" to the phenomenon. Generally, the literature describes prospective and adoptive parents and the government departments they aim

to influence as the proponents (revealing predominantly humanitarian and rescue narratives, as well as family formation and attempts to expedite more efficient adoption processes). Professional groups such as social workers and psychologists provide the opposing perspective (around displacement of birth culture and family and the long term impact of grief and trauma). Some Australian researchers claim a non-partisan view in their approach to "urging caution or voicing ethical issues in relation to adoption" as opposed to being "anti-adoption" (Fronek, 2009; Murphy et al., 2010, p. 146). Some heavily berate the intentions and actions of adoptive parents as the masterminds who influence government policy and fuel the global market trade in children, to fulfil a hidden agenda at the expense of underprivileged children and communities. Others attempt a more balanced perspective by analysing the broader social contexts and historical impacts on the evolution of ICA, presenting the practice as a legitimate postmodern choice in contemporary family formation (see Young, 2012).

2.3.1 Critical or "opponent" perspectives

Criticism of the negative impact of the adoption of children from underprivileged countries by more affluent Western families is emerging as a dominant discourse in contemporary research in Australia. In the last decade, some historical and social researchers have positioned themselves to challenge the validity of ICA and the goals of adoptive parents, labelling them as significant and powerful players within a "proponent network" which uses "tactics" to discredit those presenting alternative discourses (Fronek, 2009, pp. 42, 49). These opponent discourses claim that the "best interests of the child" is a principle often distorted to meet the needs of adoptive parents who "hunger for children" and foster a market in child acquisition over the consideration of their needs and well-being (Fronek & Cuthbert, 2012, p. 439). Murphy et al. (2010) represent this perspective, claiming that the shortage of Australian infants available for adoption since the 1980s has caused the practice to become "predominantly demand-driven" (p. 141):

> The contemporary discourses surrounding ICA share continuities with earlier discourses on adoption in Australia and beyond, reflecting an historical pattern which, at best, sees children serving the interests of adults and, at worst, has resulted in the systematic abuse of both children and birth families who invariably hold far less power than either adoptive families or

> the state and unleashed legacies of trauma and disconnection for significant numbers of people around the world (Murphy et al., 2010, p. 143).

Practices following devastating global events in poor countries (Vietnam War; Operation Babylift; Haiti earthquake evacuations; other humanitarian rescue missions) have further fuelled this perspective. In particular, the process of "rescue by adoption" has been criticised as ill-conceived and impulsively orchestrated as a result of adoptive parents lobbying governments to seize an opportunity to expedite adoption processes and to increase the number of adoptions from devastated areas (Fronek & Cuthbert, 2012, p. 439). Accounts have been documented whereby orphanages were "emptied" or children taken off the street for adoption without appropriate assessment. Several accounts identify individuals, adoption agencies and various Christian and other non-profit groups who attempted to remove children from Haiti, many of whom were not orphans and were therefore not eligible for adoption (Hearst, 2010; Rotabi & Bergquist, 2010).

Consequently, Kelley (2010) highlights the following ethical principles which many humanitarian organisations (for example, UNICEF, World Vision, Save the Children) now agree are mandatory following devastating events, to protect children and families. Principles include keeping children in their country of origin in order to aid family reunification efforts and to prevent family separation compounding the acute trauma already experienced following the disaster. Sufficient time must pass to determine whether children have been relinquished by parents (without coercion or incentive), orphaned or merely displaced, and to ensure that every effort is made to locate extended family who can care for them. Only adoptions approved prior to the disaster should proceed in order to protect children against the risk of permanent family separation or exposure to child trafficking operations. Fronek and Cuthbert (2012) argue that children's participation in a community's recovery process enhances the overall resilience and wellbeing of that community and should be supported with cultural sensitivity by Western countries, not by adopting their children. Critics of post-disaster adoptions urge proponents to consider and learn from the vast amount of research that now exists around post-adoption grief and trauma (Fronek, 2009, 2012; Fronek & Cuthbert; Selman, 2011; Willing et al., 2012).

Recent research attributes the current reduction in the number of children available for adoption from overseas to social and economic changes in the sending

countries which provide domestic solutions for children needing families (Young, 2012), such as staying with their birth family or being adopted by families in their country of origin (AIHW, 2012). The interpretation of the Australian Human Rights Commission, Convention on the Rights of the Child: "the best interest of the child" (AHRC, Article 3.1), is integral to the debate around the positives and negatives of ICA and is viewed through varied lenses. Many Australian social and welfare professionals argue that it is in the best interest of the child to be raised by a biological parent (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services, [HRSCFHS], 2005). The legal severing of birth family and cultural ties, the issuing of new birth certificates and new names, and the ramifications of relocation to a new country, they argue, bring about a "life-long legacy of loss" for both children and birth families (Fronek & Cuthbert, 2012, pp. 438, 439). Furthermore, Fronek (2012, p. 454) suggests that the resources committed to ICA over the decades may have been "better spent empowering and enabling communities to find their own solutions for their children". In contrast, the HRSCFSC report stated that "the best interest of the child" is a phrase often "used as a shield against any criticism of current adoption policy" which has led to "tens of thousands of children being placed in foster care and other forms of out-of-home care when adoption could well have been in their best interests" (2005, p. viii).

Strong criticisms in the literature are levelled at prospective and adoptive parents, particularly at their motives for adopting (for example, their preference for adopting infants as opposed to older children) (Murphy et al., 2010, p. 153), and their involvement in lobbying governments to change policy in order to fast track adoption processes in Australia (Fronek, 2009). Further, critics who argue prospective adoptive parents put their desire for family formation above the needs of the adoptive child or birth family, also describe and criticise an assumption that adoptive parents claim to be "more fit to parent than others" (Murphy et al., p. 143). However, such ambit descriptions serve only to perpetuate a stereotype and generalise the nature and motives of adoptive families which is unproductive when determining what is in the best interests of children, on a case-by-case basis.

2.3.2 Government perspectives

Government inquiries commissioned over the last decade have highlighted both the Commonwealth and Queensland Governments' perspectives on

international and domestic adoption policy. Three key inquiries conducted by the HRSCFHS (2005, 2007) and the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry (Queensland Government, 2013b) are most pertinent, as they encapsulate recent government reforms in respect to ICA.

The intention of the first inquiry was to investigate inconsistencies in approval processes and benefits and entitlements between states and territories for adoptive families (HRSCFHS, 2005, p. xiii). Throughout the inquiry, however, additional issues were raised, especially the lack of resources and support for adoptive families by welfare departments responsible for the assessment and processing of adoption applications. This was particularly so in Queensland and New South Wales, and evidence was presented that some applicants moved interstate to improve their chance of a successful outcome (HRSCFHS, 2005, p. viii). A second inquiry by the HRSCHFS Committee in 2007 into the impact of illicit drug use on Australian families concluded with recommendations which included the option of adoption for at-risk children aged 0-5. (HRSCHFS, September, 2007, p. xi, xxii). A third inquiry by the Queensland Child Protection Commission issued its report *Taking Responsibility: A Roadmap for Queensland Child Protection* in June, 2013. The inquiry was prompted by "a widespread perception that the current child protection system in Queensland is failing vulnerable children and their families"; it concluded that this perception is justified (Queensland Government, 2013b, p. xvii). The Commission supported the state government's position that children, families and society do better when children reside safely in their own family; however, when this is not possible, adoption should be considered as a viable intervention.

The Australian government's commitment to reform has continued through several key measures. These include: the implementation of a national support service, Intercountry Adoption Australia [IAA] (May, 2015); streamlined visa and citizenship processes for children adopted from South Korea and Taiwan (Australian Citizenship Amendment [Intercountry Adoption] Bill, 2014); and establishing new programs between Australia and South Africa (May, 2015), Poland and Latvia (9 November, 2015), and Bulgaria (5 May, 2016) (Australian Government, Attorney General's Department, [AGD] 2016). A further provision of up to $3.5 million over four years was made for family support services to help families and children who are going through the ICA process (Prime Minister's Website, 9 November, 2015).

The Government's ongoing commitment to opening new ICA programs, and the provision of additional support to families, indicate the continuation of ICA in Australia, albeit in small numbers.

2.3.3 "Proponent" perspectives

The advocacy perspective of adoptive parents is most clearly observable in the processes they undergo and the contributions they make. ICA in Australia is a vigorous, demanding and lengthy process and the submission of an application to adopt does not ensure a successful outcome (HRSCHFS, 2005; Queensland Government, 2013a; Queensland Government, Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services [DCCSDS], 2012). Applicants must meet not only state or territory eligibility requirements, but also the strict requirements of many overseas countries. Applicants are warned that while ICA can be rewarding and positive for both parents and children, there are inherent potential risks and challenges, including a child's "undiagnosed medical, mental, emotional, social, behavioural and/or developmental problems or conditions" (Australian Government, AGD, 2013a; DCCSDS, 2012), with commonly associated risks of "prenatal malnutrition and low birth weight, prenatal exposure to toxic substances, older age at adoption, early deprivation, abuse or neglect, multiple placements, and emotional conflicts related to loss and identity issues" (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2010, p. 5).

While adoptive parents' motives have been criticised, their contribution to advancing awareness of adoptees' experiences and the provision of practical support to involved parties is impressive. Jane Aronson, a US Clinical Assistant Professor of Paediatrics, specialises in adoption medicine, founded the Worldwide Orphans Foundation (WWO), and participates in "medical missions" to numerous orphanages around the world (www.adoptchange.org.au). Fiona Baker lectures to preservice teachers on child and language development (including international adoptees) at the Emirates College of Advanced Education in Abu Dhabi (Baker, 2013). Adam Pertman and his colleagues address social issues including child abuse**;** adoption by gay and lesbian couples; access by adoptees to family health histories; and the impact of technology on search, reunion and current adoption practices (Brodzinsky & Pertman, 2011; Miller, Chan, Reece, Tirella, & Pertman, 2007; Pertman, 2005, 2013)**.** Still others provide information, interventions and resources for parents,

teachers and preservice teachers (Meese, 2002; Riley & Meeks, 2006; Schoettle, 2000, 2003;Taymans et al., 2008; Wood & Ng, 2001). Australian researcher-adoptive parents have investigated immigrant issues of identity, citizenship and marginalization (Gehrmann, 2010) and the search for cultural belonging by intercountry adoptees (Gray, 2009). Others have established centres in undeveloped countries which provide education and support services for birth mothers and their children (Fidler, 2008). Many parents engage in adoption support groups (Australian Intercountry Adoption Network, [AICAN], 2016; IAFQ, 2016). This wide scope of research and practical engagement is significant for this study, as it highlights the collective knowledge, and the positive motivations and contributions that many adoptive parents make to the ICA experience.

In general, adoptive parents are older, well-educated people who have undergone extensive screening "to assure proper motivation and economic and relationship stability" (Johnson, 2002, p. 41). They have participated in pre-adoption training (including some exposure to risk factors) with adoption-competent psychologists and many belong to adoption support groups (Baker, 2013). This demographic is a result of restrictive eligibility criteria as set down by both Australian states and overseas authorities (Australian Government, AGD, 2013a; AIHW, 2012; Queensland Government, 2013a). Successful adoptive parents, having navigated the intricacies of the adoption process, have generally developed a high level of commitment to ensuring positive outcomes for their children. According to Gunnar et al. (2000, p. 687), most adoptive parents are "dedicated to their children and tenacious", proactively seeking mechanisms for ascertaining the needs of their children and seeking appropriate support. They generally have a good understanding of the educational challenges and opportunities for their children (Baker, 2013; Gindis, 2008; Meese, 2002). Many actively participate in cultural events and establish social connections with other adoptive families (Gunnar et al., 2000).

Adoptive parents' perspectives promote ICA as a positive and valid way of forming a permanent family for children who need one (NAAW, 2013). Advocates within adoption support groups will no doubt continue to raise awareness about the realities and implications of adoption, and to lobby government departments for improved processes and support for ICAs within the guidelines of the Hague Convention.

2.3.4 Contribution of past research

Early research into issues of attachment and loss (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1998) has informed research into the psychological adjustment of vulnerable children (Brodzinsky, 2006; Fishman & Harrington, 2007; McGinn, 2007). Terms such as "Institutionalised Autism" (Gindis, 2008), also referred to as "institutionally induced autism" (Federici, 1998), "quasi-autism" (Rutter, Colvert et al., 2007), "acquired institutional autism" (Miller, 2004), "post-institutional autistic syndrome" (Hoksbergen, Ter Laak, Rijk, Dijkum, & Stoutjesdijk, 2005), have been used to describe the "autistic-like" behaviours of a significant minority of children adopted from Romanian or other severely depriving orphanages or institutions. The cumulative cognitive deficit (CCD) of sudden native language attrition and English language acquisition and the impact this has on the behavioural and learning outcomes of intercountry adoptees has also been investigated (Gindis, 2005; Glennen, 2002). Such studies inform adoption research and the work of adoption specialists and service providers within the ICA professional community.

Australian authorities have identified, however, the need for more significant post-adoption support services, and in the past decade trauma-informed research has led to the development of practical programs and support frameworks for those who work with individuals and families impacted by adoption. Examples include: the *Therapeutic Parenting Program* (PASS, 2012); *Calmer Classrooms: A Guide to Working with Traumatised Children* (Downey, 2007), the *SMART program* (Strategies for Managing Abuse Related Trauma) (ACF, 2009), and *Making Space for Learning: Trauma Informed Practice in Schools* (ACF, 2010).

Research is now considering the significance of a range of variables, beyond age at adoption (for example, pre-adoption care arrangements) which may lead to residual effects of pre-adoption adversity on post-adoption adjustment (Pomerleau et al., 2005; Tan, Marfo, & Dedrick, 2010). Neurobiological research is also increasing understanding of prolonged exposure to institutional rearing on brain development, and in particular, on these children's emotional regulation (Tottenham et al., 2010). Some research has focused on the implications for intercountry adoptees' school experience (Dalen, 2002, 2007; Dalen & Rygvold, 2007; Donalds, 2012; Meese, 2002) and for preservice teacher training (Livingston-Smith & Riley, 2006; Baker,

2013). It is envisaged that this thesis will continue the work of raising awareness and increasing understanding about this minority group of children in our schools.

2.3.5 Controversy, stereotypes, celebrity and media influence

Controversy and debate around ICA result from different viewpoints and tensions around the positive outcomes (for example. love, security, permanence, opportunity) and negative outcomes (for example, loss of identity, culture, language, birth family) of adoption. Since Operation Babylift, the media has continued to fuel emotional responses to adoption in Australia and abroad (Cook, 1988/89; Willing, 2009; Willing et al., 2012). Media images and popular culture are "by no means inconsequential" (Wegar, 2000, p. 363) and may provide the main source of information for members of the public about adoption (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 1997, p. 15). Recently, popular magazines, news reports and social media have promoted discussion and debate around high profile celebrity adoptions, most notably those by Nicole Kidman/Tom Cruise, Madonna, Angelina Jolie/Brad Pitt, and Sandra Bullock (for example, *New York Times*, 2009; Overton, 2012). While the media is often charged with distorting truth, coverage of celebrity adoptions has added a degree of "cultural normalisation" by increasing the "visibility" of ICA while highlighting important issues around children's human rights (Murphy et al., 2010, p. 142; Bartholet, 2009).

Social media such as international blog sites have contributed to debate and raised awareness of this multilateral issue by allowing an opportunity for public opinion to be shared. On the *New York Times* blog site *Room for Debate*, Elizabeth Bartholet**,** a professor of law and the faculty director of the Child Advocacy Program at Harvard Law School, joins others to debate the issues surrounding Madonna's first adoption of Malawi-born son David and her subsequent failed attempt to adopt a second child in a discussion titled "Celebrity Adoptions and the Real World" (Aronson, 2009, May 10; Graff, 2009; Kunz, 2009; Smolin, 2009; Wright, 2009). The academic discussion on this site reveals pervasive stands taken on either side, raising many ethical considerations.

Celebrities such as ICA advocate Deborra-Lee Furness add to the profile of ICA in Australia. Furness serves both as patron and founding member of the National Adoption Awareness Week group and as Ambassador for the parent support group International Adoptive Families of Queensland (IAFQ). A strong advocate for

ICA, she aims to raise awareness and improve adoption processes within Australia (ABC, 2013; Swan, 2013).

Popular adult and children's movies (for example, *The Blind Side, White Oleander, Meet the Robinsons, Stuart Little, Kung Fu Panda, Despicable Me, and Finding Dory*), famous literary works (for example, *Anne of Green Gables*) and reality TV shows (for example, *Find My Family, I'm Having Their Baby* and *Love Child*) all serve to entertain (Donalds, 2012, p. 6) and stimulate discussion amongst adults and children alike, rather than provide factual, current information about the adoption experience. There is an all-too-obvious element of celebrity and literary detachment for the "ordinary" world of real families. However, the emergence of such discussion more frequently and more openly in these popular forums is one more element in the shaping of public perceptions on the issues. Hopefully, despite the acknowledged detachment, it will also serve to promote more open dialogue.

While the various viewpoints around ICA are contested in the literature and at Government forums and conferences, social and popular media continue to influence the public sector. Government decisions around the opening and closure of ICA programs and government apologies to the victims of past forced adoptions in Australia may also influence public opinion. It is understandable, therefore, that teachers may be confused or divided on the issues. This may impact on their beliefs about ICA and their understanding of the key issues these children may face at school.

2.4 ADOPTION AND SCHOOLS

According to the literature, the impact of pre- and post-adoption experiences on an adoptee's development (socio-emotional, behavioural and cognitive) and hence their educational experience may be influenced by various factors. Attachment theory and child development theory, together with the growing body of knowledge around the impact of traumatic experiences on the brain, pervade more recent discussion about the intercountry adoptee's experiences (Purvis, Cross, & Sunshine, 2007; Tottenham et al., 2010; Ziegler, 2011). Three main conditions for post-adoptive well-being and development are commonly discussed, namely, the child's age at adoption, the continuing impact of pre-adoption experiences (such as neglect or length of time spent in an institution), and the current parent-child relationship

(Decker & Omori, 2009; Groza & Ryan, 2002; Groze & Ileana, 1996; Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1996b). Protective factors include such things as the child's temperament, thorough preparation of adoptive parents to ensure realistic expectations, and parenting and communication style (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2010). The availability of post-adoption support services is identified as an important factor in successful adoption outcomes (Gunnar et al., 2000). An appreciation of these variables will establish a context for further examination of intercountry adoptees' experiences at school.

2.4.1 Age at adoption and time in family

Numerous studies have found that older age at adoption, and corresponding length of time spent in an institutional setting versus time in an adoptive family, makes a difference to children's long term developmental outcomes (Julian, 2013). Studies have shown that children who spend more than six months in an institution are at greater risk of developmental delays and behavioural, social and emotional problems in adolescence and may need greater educational assistance (Gunnar et al., 2007; Rutter, 1998; Rutter, Colvert et al., 2007; Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1996a; Verhulst, 2000).

Rutter (1998) studied 111 four year old Romanian children adopted into the UK before the age of two. He concluded that those adopted before the age of six months had virtually caught up in both physical and cognitive development levels, while the "catch up" rate for cognitive development in those adopted after six months was not as complete. These findings indicated that the strongest predictor of cognitive functioning at four years old was age at adoption. In contrast, Tan, Marfo, and Dedrick's (2010) study of the residual impact of pre-adoption adversity on the long term behavioural outcomes of 452 children adopted from China, showed that other variables such as developmental and psychosocial factors, (signs, symptoms, delays at adoption, initial adaptation following adoption), may provide more accurate indicators of behavioural adjustment outcomes than age at adoption.

Gunnar et al., (2000) believe that "internationally adopted children provide a model of the impact of early adversity on developmental processes and the capacity of children to recover from early adversity when their social and physical context radically changes" (p. 678; see also Brodzinsky, Smith & Brodzinsky, 1998). McGuinness, McGuinness and Dyer, (2000) evaluated the risks and the protective

influences of adoptive families and their relationships to the competencies of 105 six-to-nine year old children adopted from the former Soviet Union. While children scored below average in competence, adoptive family environments provided a "buffer" between the risks from early deprivation and their competence levels within the family and at school.

For older or school-aged adoptees this is a period of significant transition in terms of language loss and acquisition, while adapting to a new family and culture. It involves notions of "transculturality" (Gindis, 2005, p. 291) or "cultural hybridity" (Waddington, 2011, p. 81) alongside the challenge of meeting academic expectations (Glennen, 2006; Jean-Baptiste, 2012; Judge, 2004; Meese, 2002). There is also evidence to suggest that children adopted at age six or older are significantly less likely to complete tertiary studies than children adopted at a younger age, possibly due to greater difficulties experienced in high school (Decker & Ormori, 2009). Insights into the age at which children in this study joined their families and the time they spent with family prior to commencing school will aid understanding in relation to their educational experience, including their ability to "catch up", and/or delays which may cause ongoing difficulty at school.

2.4.2 Pre-adoption experiences

Some studies suggest that age at adoption provides only a partial or "proxy measure of the magnitude of pre-adoption adversity" and that other measures are necessary when examining the post-adoption adjustment and development of children (Tan et al., 2010, p. 312). Some have suggested that the pre-adoption environmental conditions in a child's birth country may have a more significant impact on development (Howe, 1997; Pomerleau et al., 2005) and these conditions may vary between countries (Tan, et al., 2010; Dalen, 2002, 2007).

Significant research was conducted in the 1990s in the United States, Canada and Great Britain following the dramatic increase in ICAs occurring there since the late 1980s and early 1990s (Gindis, 2005, 2008). Longitudinal and clinical studies identified greater risks to children who have lived their formative years in under-resourced institutions or hospitals, as compared to non-adoptees or children adopted domestically (Brodzinsky, 1990; Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992; Brodzinsky et al., 1998; Gindis, 2005; Welsh, Viana, Petrill, & Mathias, 2007). Furthermore, Julian (2013, p. 141) identified a "step-like increase in risk for lasting social and

behavioural problems" depending on the severity and type of institutional deprivation. For example, more than six months spent in globally depriving institutions of Romania and more than 18 months spent in social-emotional deprived institutions in Russia made a significant difference (Julian, 2013). In contrast, children who moved from an institutional setting to a better quality foster care arrangement demonstrate improved developmental and behavioural outcomes (Smyke, Zeanah, Fox, Nelson, & Guthrie, 2010).

Johnson (2000, p. 6), describes an orphanage as a "terrible place to raise an infant or young child". Others describe the conditions typical of globally depriving institutions which lead to the poor health and development of children residing in them for any extended time (Meese, 2002; The St. Petersburg-USA Orphanage Research Team, 2008). "Structural neglect" (Huang & Invernizzi, 2012, p. 26), such as high child-to-caregiver ratios with caregivers typically rotated in shifts, provides limited social-emotional interaction, lack of opportunity to develop nurturing relationships, with language rarely practised. Nutrition and medical care is often substandard; children are sometimes exposed to environmental toxins, and experience infections resulting from poor sanitation and hygiene, and over-crowding. Daily life is highly regimented (for example, children eat, sleep and go to the bathroom at the same time) and exercise opportunities are minimal. Many environments are devoid of stimulus, and children rarely own personal possessions such as toys or clothes (Gribble, 2015; Meese, 2002; The St. Petersburg-USA Orphanage Research Team, 2008).

Early studies provided evidence of adverse outcomes for children adopted from highly depriving institutions in Romania and the former Soviet Union (Johnson et al, 1992; Groze & Ileana, 1996; Albers, Johnson, Hostetter, Iverson, & Miller, 1997). These include variations in the degree of delayed growth (equivalent to one month of linear growth for every three months; Johnson et al., 1992; or every five months; Albers et al., 1997) depending on length of time spent in an institution. Poor general health including intestinal parasites and Hepatitis B infections (Johnson et al, 1992), and delays in gross and fine motor skills, language, social and emotional development were found (Johnson et al., 1992; Groze & Ileana, 1996). Groze and Ileana's research offered "cautious optimism" as positive post-adoption outcomes were reported by parents who stated that most children were developing well, had

good parent-child relationships and few behavioural problems. They conceded, however, that the sample group (472 children) was quite young, while approximately 25% had not yet started school. They suggested that difficulties may become more apparent once these children start school (p. 562).

A number of early studies report an over-representation of intercountry adoptees receiving special education services in U.S. schools (Brodzinsky, Radice, Huffman, & Merkler, 1987; Brodzinsky & Steiger, 1991). Some believe this is because adoptive parents may be more inclined to proactively seek support services for their children while others may tend to overreact to minor difficulties that arise (Deutsch et al., 1982; Warren, 1992). Others argue that many intercountry adoptees share a number of "risk factors", for example, poor pre-natal health care and exposure to drugs and alcohol from their birth mothers (Landgren et al., 2006; McGuinness et al., 2000), as well as developmental delays from institutional living (Rutter, 1998). Another consideration for older-placed adoptees is the varied pre-adoption school experiences that children may have had in their birth countries prior to adoption. For example, in various parts of Africa, children are less likely to have previously attended mainstream school (Makame, Ani, & Grantham-McGregor, 2002; Monasch & Boerma, 2004; Oshima & Domaleski, 2006).

While most early studies focused on children adopted from Russia, Romania (see Groza & Ryan, 2002; Gunnar et al., 2000; Gunnar et al., 2007; Wilson, 2003) and other eastern European countries, more recent studies have considered the adjustment and ongoing development of children from China (Dalen, 2002, 2007; Miller & Hendrie, 2000; Roberts, Krakow & Pollock, 2003; Roberts, Pollock & Krakow, 2005; Roberts, Pollock, Krakow et al., 2005; Tan & Yang, 2005; Tan, Marfo & Dedrick, 2010; Tan, Loker, Dedrick & Marfo, 2012).

Miller and Hendrie (2000) studied 452 children adopted from China between 1991 and 1996 to determine their health and developmental status after arriving in the United States. Similar serious medical and developmental issues and growth patterns were found to those studied from other countries, with a higher incidence of lead levels among these children. Another Canadian study by Cohen, Lojkasek, Zadeh, Pugliese and Kiefer (2008) of 70 infant girls adopted from China compared the mental, psychomotor, and language development to a similar non-adopted Canadian group. Results showed that the girls adopted from China "caught up" to the

non-adopted group after two years in their adoptive families; however, measures of physical growth still saw them lagging behind their peers. This study confirmed the long term impact of deprivation on physical growth and the importance of good early nutrition.

Early studies which compare the well-being of adoptees with non-adoptees reveal that intercountry adoptees manage quite well at school when compared to non-adopted children in spite of challenging beginnings (Bagley & Young, 1979; Feigelman & Silverman, 1983; Simon & Altstein, 1981). More recent studies continue to provide an optimistic outlook with fewer negative long term effects for children adopted from better quality Korean and Chinese orphanages (Dalen, 2002; Tan, Marfo & Dedrick, 2007, 2010). For example, South Korean-born children have shown the most promising educational outcomes (Dalen, 2002; Dalen & Rygvold, 2006; van Ijzendoorn, Juffer & Poelhuis 2005); children adopted from China as infants and toddlers acquire their "second-first language" rapidly (Roberts, Pollock, Krakow et al, 2005; Tan & Yang, 2005); and measures of Chinese girls' behavioural adjustment prior to the age of five show "comparable or even slightly better behavioural adjustment" to their non-adopted U.S. peers (Tan et al., 2010, p. 312).

These and other studies show that an understanding of children's pre-adoptive experience, and the effect on post-adoption adjustment and development, is an essential precursor to supporting intercountry adoptees in school. However, the lack of accurate and available information about pre-adoption factors and the diversity of early experiences is problematic and therefore often precluded from the research (Dalen & Rygvold, 2006). When information is available, however, care must be taken not to over-pathologise these children based on their previous experience. Meese (2002) warns parents and teachers to consider each child on a case-by-case basis. That is, just as every child is unique so too is their adoption experience and care must be taken not to make generalised assumptions. For some children the impact of early deprivation will not disappear completely and pre-adoptive experiences may cause long term delays in some areas of development (Groze & Ileana, 1996). Others, however, may demonstrate impressive resilience following adversity, particularly when placed in a stable and nurturing family (McGuinness et al., 2000).

2.4.3 Institutionalisation and post-adoption behaviour

The research has identified sensory integration problems in children who have lived for extended periods of time in Eastern European institutions (Bascom & McKelvey, 1997; Cermak & Mitchell, 2006; Cermak & Daunhauer, 1997; Groze & Ileana, 1996; Lin, Cermak, Coster & Miller, 2005). Meese (2002) identified overt behaviours that may cause disruption in classrooms, including over-reacting aggressively or fearfully to touch or constantly touching others and their belongings, and irritability, anxiety or excessive excitability in new situations. Others may exhibit excessive anger, avoidant or ambivalent responses; they may be loud, clingy or overly independent; aggressive or controlling with other children (Lavery, 2013). These types of behaviours may be misinterpreted by teachers, other children and parents as behaviour problems and lead to loss of self-esteem and social acceptance. Others with sensory integration problems may have difficulty with everyday class activities (gripping a pencil, using scissors, colouring in, following simple instructions) which may cause them to fall behind with their school work (Meese, 2002). Children who experience these difficulties may benefit from early screening by an occupational therapist for sensory integration and development issues (Lin, Cermak, Coster & Miller, 2005).

Some studies have labelled these and other typically learned institutional behaviours as "autistic-like" (Gindis, 2008), due to the observable similarities between the behaviours of these children and others with medically diagnosed autistic spectrum disorders. Behaviours may include self-stimulation (head-banging, rocking), self-mutilation (skin picking, hair pulling) self-comfort (withdrawal, finger sucking), self-defence (hyper-vigilance to gestures, tone of voice, noise), temper tantrums and resistance to changes in routine, and more (Federici, 1998; Gindis, 2008; Hoksbergen, Ter Laak, Rijk et al., 2005; Rutter, Colvert et al., 2007). According to Gindis, these behaviours are adaptive in nature and are brought on as a reaction to "emotional traumata, loss of primary caregiver, isolation in hospital cribs, and lack of stimulation" (p. 18).

Institutionalised children learn "survival skills" which serve their purpose in an orphanage but are not appropriate for family living, or for making friends at school. Children may inappropriately endear themselves to strangers; steal, hoard and/or gorge food or endeavour always to be first and in control of situations and others

(Gindis, 2008; Gribble, 2015). Such negative early childhood experiences can have long-term and detrimental effects on children which may not manifest themselves until they enter school and find themselves grappling with new behavioural, social and academic expectations (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2010).

More recently, an emerging area of neuroscience research has focused on the neurobiological bases of executive function [EF][3]) and social-moral development in both typical and atypical development (Barrasso-Catanzaro & Eslinger, 2016). More specifically, others have investigated the development of EF and the prefrontal cortex in previously institutionalised children (Merz, Harle, Noble & McCall, 2016) and the impact of environmental and social deprivation and chronic stress on the developing brain. Highly depriving conditions in substandard institutions described earlier have been implicated in the development of chronic stress responses and lower EF in post-institutionalised children (Blair & Raver, 2012; Doom et al., 2014; Merz & McCall, 2011).

Furthermore, studies which examine disinhibited or indiscriminate social behaviour in internationally adopted children compared to non-adopted children show that the adopted children displayed higher levels of these behaviours (Bruce, Tarullo & Gunnar, 2009; Gleason, et al., 2014). Recent longitudinal studies have also concluded that older age at adoption is a predictor for inattentive/overactive behaviours (Audet & Le Mare, 2010; Helder, Brooker, Kapitula, Goalen & Gunnoe, 2016; Kreppner et al., 2010). These studies highlight the need for longer follow-up of older adoptees and ongoing support for children at risk of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties which may be evident at school. Helder et al., (2016) suggest that a more comprehensive intervention which addresses attachment and internalising difficulties as well as obvious inattention/overactivity behaviours may be necessary.

[3] Executive functioning is an umbrella term used to describe cognitive processes which are important for everyday functioning, including the ability to set goals and to plan, organise, problem solve and initiate activities, and to adjust to changes in routine tasks. It also involves effective working memory as well as inhibition control (Barrasso-Catanzaro & Eslinger, 2016; Merz et al., 2016)

2.4.4 Social and emotional development

All adopted children have experienced loss, interruptions to attachment and trauma in some form in their early years. These experiences can have a profound impact on their social, emotional, cognitive and behavioural development and feelings of security (Becker-Weidman, 2009b, p. 2; Post Placement Support Service [PPSS], 2012, p. 5). The identification of emotional and behavioural difficulties and decisions about appropriate service, resource provision and best practices to support children is often challenging (Webber & Plotts, 2008), especially when behaviours may be subtle and perceived as "normal" childhood behaviours or anxieties (Huberty, 2010). A child may feel a strong sense of rejection when a peer chooses to play elsewhere; changes to daily routine or teacher can cause severe anxiety and insecurity. Behaviour management strategies such as a restatement of rules and consequences may be perceived as a threat and trigger a negative reaction (PASS, 2013).

Children who have had multiple attachment disruptions (for example, multiple placements in foster care prior to adoption) may become distrustful of adults, which can lead to hyper-vigilance, extreme independence or clinginess. Generally, children will feel more secure over time as they "learn to trust the permanence" of their new life. However, some may "regress at times of transition or stress such as starting school, a parent going back to work, or the child going into a new grade". Children may also feel a "pervasive sense of shame" or exhibit "busy behaviour"[4] (PASS, 2013, p. 11).

Some children may exhibit signs of precocious puberty (Juffer & van Ijzendoorn, 2009), particularly if adopted over the age of two (Teilmann, Pedersen, Skakkebæk, & Jensen, 2006). In a small number of severe cases, Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD)[5] may be clinically diagnosed by a psychiatrist and a consistent treatment and management plan put in place both at home and at school (Hoksbergen & ter Laak, 2007). RAD is a relatively new diagnosis for a sub-group

[4] "Busy behaviour (constant movement) may result from hyper-arousal, hyperactivity or an inability to self-regulate. It has also been linked to episodes of malnutrition (PASS, 2013)

[5] Reactive attachment disorder results from social neglect or other conditions that inhibit a young child's ability to form selective attachments, resulting in consistently emotionally withdrawn behaviour toward adult caregivers (The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare [CEBC], (2016).

of children identified (under the age of 5) as having "significant and detrimental insecure attachments"(Stinehart, Scott, & Barfield, 2012, p. 1) as a result of disruption in the initial attachment between primary care-giver and child (Hoksbergen & ter Laak, 2007; Minnis et al., 2009). Children most typically diagnosed with this disorder are those who have experienced severe neglect or abuse at a young age and as a result demonstrate significant behavioural problems (Hanson & Spratt, 2000).

Children who have spent time in an institutional setting may exhibit a younger emotional age than their peers. For some, previous relationships with other children in their birth country may have had a profound effect on their current social capacity to interact with children of their chronological age (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006) and poorer language skills may also affect their ability to make friends and be accepted by other children (Scarvelis, Crisp & Goldingay, 2014). These factors may contribute to decisions about appropriate year level placement when starting school as well as ongoing social support.

2.4.5 Racism and cultural identity

According to Williams (2003), transracial adoptees "are not immune from racism" by virtue of their adoption by predominantly white adoptive parents, and typically begin to experience exclusion "once they enter society" (p. 144). This is generally when they enter school. Huh and Reid's (2000) study of 40 Korean adoptees' experiences reveals that racist actions or comments at school may be overt and intentional or more subtle and unintentional. They found that children were regularly asked questions about their ethnicity and experienced a significant amount of teasing from other children from about the age of seven. One commented, "Sometimes people would call me Chinese. I would say that I am not Chinese. I am Korean. I didn't like that because I was Korean" (Huh & Reid, 2000, p. 81). Similarly, children felt the pressure of having to live up to adults' perceptions of cultural stereotypes. One remarked, "Koreans have a reputation for being hard workers. So if I don't turn in something in school, they say 'You are Korean, so how come?'" (p. 84).

Australian schools are a significant setting in which racism occurs, particularly for children from diverse cultural backgrounds (Greco, Priest & Paradies, 2010; Mansouri & Jenkins, 2010). A growing body of literature implicates school

principals' constructions of racism (Aveling, 2007; Hollinsworth, 1998) and the intersection of race, class, gender and religion within the social and historical context of schools and communities (Charles, Fox, Halse & Mahoney, 2014; Nieto & Bode, 2012). It has been noted that "institutional racism"[6] may take various subtle forms, for example, significant historical omissions within the curriculum; insensitive selection of teaching resources; "superficial and reductionist" approaches to multiculturalism, and downplaying the management of racial victimisation as "normal schoolyard bullying" (Aveling, pp. 78, 80). Individually, children and adolescents who are ethnically "different" to their peers are often marginalised and vulnerable to bullying and this may negatively impact on their psychosocial well-being (Correa-Velez, Gifford, & Barnett, 2010). Quite often, however, bullying is covert and difficult for parents and teachers to detect (Le Bon & Boddy, 2010).

Vietnamese-Australian adoptee Indigo Williams (2003), who joined her Australian family in 1972, completed her Master's degree in 2003, titled *Not quite/just the same/different: The construction of identity in Vietnamese war orphans adopted by white parents*. Her research into the experiences of 13 adult adopted Vietnamese war orphans throughout their life histories reported many common occurrences where adoptees struggled with racial and cultural identity while growing up.

> I was raised white, but I didn't feel white because of my dark skin, and I wasn't black because I didn't talk black or dress black. I didn't feel Asian because I didn't know Vietnamese or any Asians (Minh, K. in Williams, 2003, p. 25).

Hübinette and Tigervall's (2009; Tigervall & Hübinette, 2010) research views the racial discrimination of "non-white" adoptees through a framework of critical race and whiteness theories. Based on qualitative interviews with 20 adult intercountry adoptees and eight native-born Swedish adoptive parents,[7] the study

[6] Institutional racism arises from pervasive, complex structures and processes which have been naturalised over time, are therefore often unintentional, yet serve to maintain racial inequality (Hollinsworth, 1998). Such racism is often enacted through "countless mundane actions and decisions" (Gillborn, 2008, p. 243), appear "ordinary", and are therefore difficult to detect (Gooden, p. 243).

[7] Sweden is considered to have had the most international adoptions in relation to its native-born population (50,000 foreign-born adoptees over a 50 year period) and therefore provides a good case for examining their experiences of racialization and ethnic identity.

confirms the existence of "racialization" (Hübinette & Tigervall, 2009, p. 494) in school, describing other children, teachers and school personnel as key "perpetrators" (p. 346). All adoptees reported being treated differently in some way at school. Adult adoptees reflected on experiences of "playground racism" which commonly occurred out of view of school personnel, and instances where teachers would pair up children of colour (for example, a child adopted from Sri Lanka and a child whose family immigrated from China) to "take care of" each other (p. 347). The study suggests that while teachers generally do this with the good intention of supporting children who may look and feel different from their peers, the reality is that this practice divides children on the basis of appearance and perpetuates "racist practices of segregation and apartheid" (p. 347).

Williams' research concludes that cultural and racial identity is socially constructed and dependent on positive constructions of "difference" offered by parents and others. She also argued that the notion of "colour blindness", where difference is minimised or ignored, does not assist the adoptee. More importantly, "giving racial and cultural diversity recognition and validation" helps adoptees to authenticate their mixed or "hybrid" identities (Williams, 2003, p. 144). Similarly, Banks and Banks (2010) assert that awareness of the influence of prior cultural/racial experience, including preconceptions of social class across cultures, may foster greater empathy (from students and teachers), overcoming prejudices which can otherwise hinder productive partnerships. Children who develop social relationships across cultural groups are more likely to demonstrate positive interracial attitudes and actions, as differences are minimised and personal qualities prioritised (Allport, 1954; Banks & Banks, 2010; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005).

Some argue that an authentic approach to "multicultural education" in schools requires the reformation of the total school environment across a number of domains such as teacher attitudes, perceptions and beliefs; languages spoken; curriculum and instructional materials used; in order to "create a school culture that promotes positive attitudes toward diverse cultural groups", which in turn helps these students experience success at school (Banks & Banks, 2010, p. 24). Indeed, it may take more than the incorporation of particular "heroes and holidays" (Lee, Menkart & Okazawa-Rey, 2002), or the isolated celebration of notable people and events, at select times on the school calendar. Rather, it may require more genuine and creative

ways in which to "invite student lives into the classroom" (Christensen, 2013, pp. 395-6).

Comments and questions experienced by minority groups are common and unavoidable, are often a product of natural curiosity or misinformation, and may occur between the closest of friends. When children are comfortable in responding to comments and questions, their self-esteem as well as their friendships are more likely to remain intact (Singer, 2010). Nevertheless, the post adoption survey by the Post Adoption Support Queensland (PASQ) team in 2010 (published in 2013) highlights that parents are still concerned that "the identity development and self-esteem challenges faced by their children commonly related to their children's negative school experiences", including experiences of racism (PASQ, 2013, p. 11).

These findings have further implications for the way in which parents and teachers collaborate on issues of race and cultural identity at school. In particular, it appears that opportunities could be provided that allow intercountry adoptees to negotiate positive ways of belonging to both their birth and their adoptive cultures and which create a classroom climate in which all children accept and value difference.

2.4.6 Language and cognitive development

As with many non-adoptive parents, Gindis (2005) states that adoptive parents of school-age intercountry adoptees are often concerned about their children's academic performance (see also Ames & Chisolm, 1997; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2010; Groze & Ileana, 1996; Howard, Smith & Ryan, 2004; Judge, 1999, 2004; Meese, 2002; PASQ, 2013). Dalen (2002) adds that adoptive parents sometimes set standards and expectations for their children's school performance too high, which can impact negatively on their self-esteem. It is important for parents and teachers to have an understanding of the impact of language and cognitive development, particularly in relation to the institutionalised and/or older-placed adoptee. This has been a focus of empirical studies and clinical experience overseas for more than a decade (Dalen, 2002, 2007; Dalen & Rygvold, 2006; Gindis, 2005, 2008; Glennen, 2002, 2007, 2008; Glennen & Masters, 2002; Glennen, Roberts & Scott, 2011; Hoksbergen & Ter Laak, 2007; Hoksbergen et al., 2005; Juffer & van Ijzendoorn, 2009; van Ijzendoorn & Juffer, 2005' van Ijzendoorn, Juffer et al., 2005).

The literature generally agrees that intercountry adoptees are "entirely unique in their language learning process, which puts them at high risk for language learning problems" (Meacham, 2006, pp. 73; see also Dalen, 2002; Dalen & Rygvold, 2006; Gauthier & Genesee, 2011; Jean-Baptiste, 2012; Judge, 2004; Juffer & van Ijzendoorn, 2005). One of the reasons for this is that intercountry adoptees are often mistakenly considered to be "bilingual" (able to use functional skills in more than one language) or "ESL" (English as a second language) learners which may lead to inaccurate remedial action in schools to support them in acquiring their new adoptive language (Glennen, 2002; Glennen & Masters, 2002; Gindis, 2005). According to Sleeter and Grant (2009), "… all bilingual education models assume that the language and culture a child learns at home can promote normal and healthy language acquisition, psychological development and communication competence" (p. 56). However, unlike simultaneous bilingualism[8] or successive bilingualism[9] (Grosjean, 1982; Long, 1990; Schiff-Myers, 1992), school-aged intercountry adoptees may begin to lose their native language in three to six months in a new country and lose significant functionality after six to twelve months (Gindis, 1999, 2005). Unlike bilingual learners whose second language learning is supported by proficiency in a first language (Collier, 1995; Cummins, 1981, 1991; Gutierrez-Clellen, 1999), this is not the case for intercountry adoptees.

What is most commonly noted in the literature is the discrepancy which often exists between the children's everyday contextualised language or Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (Cummins, 1981) and their Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (Cummings, 1981) or decontextualized, academic language (Dalen, 2002; Dalen & Rygvold, 2006). Studies have confirmed that adoptees generally performed well on everyday contextual language, but that this did not always translate to successful academic outcomes. In fact, lower results on academic language aligned more closely to children's school results. Higher levels of hyperactivity and lower results on academic language often affected intercountry adoptees' educational outcomes (Dalen, 2002; Dalen & Rygvold, 2006).

[8] Simultaneous bilingualism refers to two languages being learnt concurrently (for example, from parents who each speak a different language).

[9] Successive bilingualism refers to one language being learnt first before another (for example, children in immigrant families who continue to speak their native language at home, or students who elect to learn a second language while still maintaining their first).

Age at adoption, chronological age and length of time spent learning English have been identified as significant factors in intercountry adoptees' successful language acquisition (Glennen & Masters, 2002; Meacham, 2006; Krakow, Tao & Roberts, 2005; Tan, Loker, Dedrick & Marfo, 2012). While some studies show that the acquisition of a "second-first language" has optimistic outcomes for children adopted as infants (Roberts, Pollock & Krakow, 2003; Roberts, Pollock, Krakow, Price, Fulmer & Wang, 2005), others confirm the negative impact on linguistic and cognitive development, particularly for older-placed children in school (Gindis, 2005; Glennen, 2006).

Furthermore, international adoptees differ from non-adopted or immigrant children as a result of the radical switch from first to second language, where first-language speakers are generally not present to maintain their birth language or support them in this transition (Glennen & Masters, 2002). In addition, rapid first-language loss precedes slower second-language acquisition (Glennen & Masters, 2002; Glennen, Roberts, & Scott, 2011; Jean-Baptiste, 2012). The literature asserts that this notion of "language switch" (Jean-Baptiste, 2012) is the result of abrupt and full immersion into the new adoptive language and culture. Since the original language is not usually spoken by the adoptive family, there is no longer an opportunity or a need to maintain the first language. Furthermore, Gindis (1999, 2005) argues that for many adoptees placed with their adoptive family at age five or above, the desire to adjust and to "fit in" with new family and friends (or to put all reminders of negative early life experiences prior to adoption behind them) may provide added incentive to disregard the first language altogether.

Judge's (2004) study of 159 children adopted into the U.S. from institutions in the former Soviet Union investigated the impact of institutionalisation on child and family outcomes. Her study found that many children who present with developmental delays at the time of adoption "catch up" within the first six months of being in a loving and stable family which has the knowledge and resources to provide the necessary remedial supports. However, findings also showed that at least a third of those studied still exhibited significant language and speech delays for a longer period of time. Glennen (2002) explains that the language switch phenomenon generally results in a period of time where the adoptee has very little skill in both languages. This can cause difficulties with inefficient communication needed for

everyday social interactions, for self-regulation of behaviour and for understanding academic language at school. Gindis (2005) cites numerous researchers who agree that without fundamental language skills "inappropriate, immature, or clearly maladaptive behaviour" may result (p. 300).

Difficulties exist when determining how best to assess and support these children in school. It is not unusual for schools to delay testing intercountry adoptees for several years post-adoption, until they have developed adequate English language skills (Elleseff, 2011). However, as these children are not bilingual learners, standardised tests do not provide accurate results (Elleseff, 2011; Glennen, 2002). The literature suggests that due to the rapid replacement of their dominant first language, ideally, children adopted over the age of five should be assessed in their first language as soon as possible after adoption, and any documentation available from a child's birth country which indicates known language delays should be used to help qualify a child for immediate speech and language services when they commence school (Baker, 2013; Glennen, 2002, 2007).

Numerous studies highlight the cognitive functions and educational attainment of intercountry adoptees' academic achievement (Dalen, 2007; van Ijzendoorn & Juffer, 2005; van Ijzendoorn et al., 2005). Recently, other small-scale empirical studies conducted in the United States have extended previous research. For example, Reynolds (2012) compared the verbal working memory of seven children adopted from Eastern Europe and 12 adopted from Asian countries with a control group of 15 non-adoptees and found comparable performance between adopted and non-adopted children but significant differences amongst the adopted children. Research in the United States and Canada indicates that over half of all adoptees require additional academic support or special education services for at least the first two to four years of their formal schooling (Ames et al., 2000; Groze & Ileana, 1996; Judge, 2004; Meese, 2002).

2.4.7 Post-adoption support

Gunnar et al. (2000) identify a great need for additional post-adoption support for children who were adopted from overseas. Research identifies that adoptive parents most commonly seek tutoring support for reading problems and second language learning, and early intervention through special education services for

learning disabilities and behavioural difficulties, speech and hearing problems (Howard & Smith, 2003; Howard et al., 2004; Judge, 2004).

In the absence of formal support, adoptive parents often collaborate via support groups to share information about issues such as telling a child about their adoption and birth country, managing overwhelming behaviours, and dealing with the "hurtful comments of strangers" (Gunnar et al., 2000, p. 687). These findings are confirmed by a recent survey of adoptive parents conducted by PASQ (2013) which identified behavioural issues and other concerns which emerge at different stages of a child's development. In particular, parents of school-age children identified the transition to school as a difficult time, with one respondent noting that "behavioural issues only emerged when their child commenced school" (p. 11). The PASQ report also stated that parents frequently commented on their children's "difficulties dealing with 'intrusive' questions (including school assignments about family history)" and with experiences of bullying in relation to their children's "adoptive status" (PASQ, p. 11).

According to Meese (2002), these children will experience many of the challenges typical of other children, but these experiences may be complicated by adoption issues. Adoptive parents often endeavour to meet with teachers at the beginning of a school year to discuss adoption issues with new teachers and to provide information and resources which may support their children (Wood, 2001). Care must be taken, however, when discussing potential difficulties, not to incorrectly attribute normal developmental challenges to problematic adoption-related issues. The PASQ parent survey confirmed that some parents find it difficult to differentiate between what is "normal" and what are adoption-related difficulties, and consequently do not always know how to support their children (PASQ, 2013, p. 10). Teachers and parents are in a better position to provide appropriate support if they co-operate to minimise the risks and maximise positive outcomes for children's school performance throughout the various stages of their development (Meese, 2002).

2.5 FURTHER EDUCATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Researchers have highlighted various issues which should be discussed collaboratively by parents, teachers and school administrators to ensure that schools

are "adoption-sensitive" and inclusive. These include the selection of school; selection of teacher and appropriate year level placement at enrolment, particularly for the older adoptee; accurate assessment and accommodation of language and learning needs; issues pertaining to previous or other racial or cultural experiences; modelling positive and respectful adoption language; and modifying potentially problematic curriculum units, topics and tasks (Meese, 2002; Schoettle, 2003; Sleeter & Grant, 2009; Wood & Ng, 2001).

2.5.1 Education professionals' understanding of the ICA experience

According to Carrington et al., (2012, p. 11) teachers who possess an "inclusive mindset" possess the "attitudes, beliefs and values" as well as the knowledge, skill and ability to use a "range of effective pedagogies" that meet the diverse needs of all students in their classrooms. The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2013) state that educators are also required to implement "positive interactions" in the classroom which support students (S4.1) and to undertake professional development programs "to address identified student learning needs" (S6.4). Teachers are also required to "establish and maintain respectful collaborative relationships with parents/carers regarding their children's learning and wellbeing" (S7.3) (AITSL, 2013, pp. 8, 12, 14).

Livingston-Smith and Riley (2006, p. 1) claim that an increasing number of adoptive families in the United States are facing challenges in school which negatively impact on adoptees' social (peer relationships), emotional (self-image) and academic (assessment of competence) success. Meese (2002, p. x) argues that education professionals generally "do not understand the cognitive and emotional implications of institutionalisation, nor do they recognise the socio-emotional implications of adoption during routine classroom activities and social interchanges", which may prevent them from appropriately supporting these children. Not unlike parents of children with disabilities prior to mandated special education services in schools, adoptive parents of post-institutionalised children, "are often more tuned in to the special needs of their children than are professionals" (Meese, 2005). Teachers, therefore, may benefit from professional reading and development which may involve accessing available resources, for example, the SMART on-line learning modules and the *Intercountry adoption: Information for teachers* booklet (ACF, 2009; PASS, 2013).

Issues of cultural sensitivity and language development for both younger and older-placed intercountry adoptees are significant. For example, teachers and parents may overlook or underestimate early language delays which may lead to a "deficit view" (Carrington et al., 2012, p. 13) of a child's ability and inappropriate placement in special education programs. In the case of older-placed adoptees, general classroom teachers may be ill-prepared to cater for the linguistic or cultural needs of children who have recently arrived in the country. Edwards (2010) argues that many teachers are not prepared to proficiently cater for linguistic and cultural diversity in the classroom:

> Over three decades or so, I have been amazed and disappointed at how ill-prepared teachers typically are with regard to linguistic and cultural variation in the classroom. The education of teachers generally involves very little exposure to this sort of heterogeneity, and yet it is easy to see that it has made its presence felt in virtually every global setting. Even schools in 'traditional' and rural areas whose populations were historically both local and stable are now more and more confronted with children from many different backgrounds" (p. 1)

Other considerations include the language used by peers and adults about adoption and families, the degree of disclosure and treatment of information shared with staff about the children's backgrounds, the myriad of questions and comments made by others about their culture of origin, birth parents, and reasons for their adoption, as well as the challenges created by some traditional curriculum tasks.

Gray (2009) argues that while the experience of intercountry adoptees may overlap with the experience of those from third or fourth generation immigrant families, much of the adoptee's experience (for example, adoption, not living with birth family in birth country, living in a predominantly "white" society and being racially different from family members), "may well be unique to the international adoption experience" (p. 29). It is understandable, therefore, that teachers' own backgrounds, experience and knowledge gained from various sources may lead them to believe that the experiences of "other-race" groups in their school are mutually exclusive. Riley and Meeks (2006) argue that while intercountry adoptees essentially have two cultures, they generally take on the "language, rituals, customs, values, and beliefs of the adoptive family" (p. 128). They recount a counselling session with an

adopted teen, Alyssa, who talked of her sense of cultural belonging in the context of her school experience:

> It's hard to feel connected to a history or people when I know very little about my ethnic background. I might look Korean, but I see myself as American. People, especially my teachers and kids at school that don't know me, base who I am on my appearance. They think if I look Asian, then I am Asian. They are totally wrong. I get mad that I am always having to explain myself. Also, you know about those stereotypes. Just because I am Asian does not mean I am good at math. I suck at math! (p.128)

Gray (2009, p. 214) suggests that the discourse of 30 years ago, that of "lucky to be rescued" has been replaced with the discourse of the adoptee as "victim of a 'loss of culture' and 'loss of identity'". She maintains, however, that the discourse of multiculturalism since the 1990s has seen minority groups, including intercountry adoptees, "reimagining" (Gray, p. 213) themselves in terms of their cultural identity in Australia. How then do teachers, given this constant repositioning of the adoptee's "place and space" in Australia and globally, perceive and respond to the adoptee in their class? How does the teacher who has knowledge or experience of adoption practices and outcomes of the 1950s to 1970s consider the adoptive family in the 21st century? Gray's recent study of how intercountry adoptees construct their sense of identity and cultural belonging reveals that when these children have adequate social support and opportunities to travel and interact regularly with people from different cultures, they are able to "see themselves as having choices and opportunities" (Gray, p. 213), develop "strategies of resilience and strength", and are able to explore "multiple identity positions" (Gray, p. 214). How then do teachers view adoptees if their only exposure to adoption issues has been via television shows which predominantly highlight "search and reunion" stories and perpetuate the view of adoptee as victim? Gray's research found that support for intercountry adoptees needs to include:

> a supportive family, knowledge and access to a diverse range of sub-culture styles, supportive peer groups, access to information and resources on adoption and race issues, and appropriate school programmes which address issues such as bullying and racism and other special needs (Gray, p. 217).

2.5.2 School selection and year level placement

For many parents the choice of school often includes consideration of the cost of private school tuition fees, high stakes outcomes, declining confidence in and views about behaviour in certain government schools (Cahill & Gray, 2010). The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (2010, p. 30) highlights that "school is where adopted children face the most challenges and parents express the most concerns" (see also Howard, Smith & Ryan, 2004; Judge, 2004). Meese (2002) recommends that adoptive parents should spend time researching the school/s that facilitate smaller class sizes and provide appropriate learning support.

Gribble (2015) argues that the decision to delay school commencement for the post-institutionalised child may be in their best interests, particularly if these environments cause them stress or ongoing fears of abandonment. School commencement and year level placement for an intercountry adoptee, particularly a child at or close to school age, needs to be considered carefully in light of their adjustment and attachment needs. As a precursor to the consideration of school needs, the Queensland Adoption Act (2009) requires prospective adoptive parents to demonstrate:

> (1) …they are aware it is ordinarily in a child's best interests to receive full-time care provided personally by one or both of the persons with whom the child is placed for at least 1 year after the child is placed in their care.
> (2) [Also] the couple must provide details to the chief executive of their proposed, or expected, care arrangements for a child for at least the first year of the child's placement with them (Queensland Government, 2009, pp. 3-4).

The Department of Human Services (DHS), Victoria, is more specific about determining school readiness. The Intercountry Adoption Information Kit states:

> Where the child is kindergarten/school aged, parents must commit to assessing the child's kindergarten/school readiness in conjunction with the IAV Case Manager and any other professionals that may be involved with the child, after the child has spent a minimum of six months in placement with their new adoptive family. When an older child is assessed as ready to commence schooling, the expectation is for a consistent parent(s) to be available out-of-school hours. However, it is important to note that older

> children face significant issues and will require a parent to be available to them, despite their attendance at school. This could entail assisting at school; unexpected extra time off from school; attending meetings; counselling; actively employing and overseeing therapeutic plans for their child; and many other possibilities. IAV advises adoptive parents to devote a minimum of 12 months to the stable and consistent care of their adopted child, regardless of their age (Victorian Government, DHS, 2016, p. 11).

Clearly, government adoption departments and legislation consider the needs of each child as central to decisions about school commencement, and parent involvement as a necessary part of that process. Alternatively, children may need time to adjust to their new environment, and some parents may choose to keep them at home for up to a year.

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) (2010) recommends that children with diverse needs, including additional cultural and language needs, should be included in classrooms with other children of the same age, with variations to teaching strategies, curriculum or assessment standards made to meet the child's individual needs. This may cause a dilemma for some families who determine that a school-age child needs time at home, particularly if that means the child must be placed with chronological-age peers after having missed a period of schooling. Meese (2002) argues that the decision to delay the "older-placed" child's start to school, or to begin them a year below their chronological age, "may achieve a better 'match' with the child's developmental age than by adhering to his or her chronological age placement" (p. 82). These are important considerations to be addressed by the school principal and support personnel, the parents and post-adoption support services, to ensure appropriate actions are taken in relation to the child's school commencement and year level placement.

2.5.3 Transition to primary school

Further to decisions about school commencement and year level placement, the Queensland government's vision outlined in the policy *Every student succeeding – State Schools Strategy 2014–2018* (Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE, 2014) encourages the development and implementation of explicit strategies for "successful transitions through each phase of learning". This policy emphasises a collaborative team approach to identifying and supporting the

unique needs of each child, taking into account their "diverse knowledge, understandings, dispositions and experiences" while acknowledging that "children learn and develop at different rates in response to their experiences" (Powell, 2010). This may involve the early assessment, identification and diagnosis of needs (Kendell, 1975; Achenbach, 1974; Webber & Plotts, 2008).

Highlighting the importance not only of children's readiness for school, but also the "school's readiness" to provide quality transition programs for children, this policy also emphasises the significance of effective school leadership and collaboration with families and the community. Meese (2002) suggests that school administrators should consider that older-placed adoptees may benefit from being placed with the same teacher for more than one year to enable the teacher to become very familiar with the child's needs and to develop a supportive and trusting relationship with both parent and child. A multi-age classroom with slightly older children may also provide an opportunity for a new adoptee to learn social and language cues from older children, while being less inclined to intimidate them with possible unsociable behaviours.

For a child with a trauma history, the investment of personnel and resources is important and necessary, and should involve parents, school and child support agency personnel in the development of an individualised transition program. Ultimately, the aim is to reduce anxiety levels and to create a calm, well-supported environment for the child as they start school (Howard, 2013). In the case of children adopted closer to or at school age there are variations in the educational and psychological perspectives which influence transition goals for these children.

Educational perspectives support the numerous studies which have found either negligible or negative outcomes from the retention of students who fail to meet year level standards (Huang, 2014; A. Martin, 2011; Meisels & Liaw, 1993; Morrison & Ieong On No, 2007). However, studies which focus on the commencement age of children in kindergarten, for example, suggest academic and social advantage for children whose birth dates place them in the old-for-grade group in their cohort (Oshima & Domaleski, 2006). Children who are young-for-grade have been reported to score lower than their older peers on various early literacy measures which persisted for the first few years of schooling (Huang & Invernizzi, 2012). Furthermore, young-for-grade children who lack the socio-emotional skills which

support participation in school (sitting still, paying attention, getting along with peers), or who demonstrate high levels of externalising behaviour, may experience cumulative risks for later retention (Appleyard, Egeland, Dulmen & Sroufe, 2005; Huang, 2014).

Psychological perspectives indicate that the emotional age of children who have experienced complex trauma may be less than half their chronological age (Becker-Weidman, 2009a), which logically affects school readiness. Powell (2010) argues that chronological age is only one factor to consider. Indeed, the development of the whole child across the cognitive, affective, physical and social domains, as well as variations in language development for second-first language learners, and adjustment to a new culture and family, are also crucial considerations in the appropriate placement and progression of intercountry adoptees in school.

2.5.4 Adoption-sensitive language

Language conveys powerful messages and teachers need to guard against fostering a "deficit view" about particular groups of children (Graham, 2007, p. 35). A teacher's choice of words communicates to children their beliefs and attitudes (Melina, 1998). Labelling children as "foster kids" or "adopted children" can stigmatise children and "distort the lens through which [a] person comes to be seen and read by others" (Graham, 2007, p. 35). Teachers and other education professionals should model positive adoption language which supports the child when adoption-related issues arise at school or when confronted by comments, questions or teasing (Meese, 2002). For example, talking about "birth" or "biological" parents is more appropriate than using the terms "real" or "natural" parents as these terms imply that the adoptive parent is "unreal" or "unnatural". When discussing members of a child's family, the terms "parent/mother/father/brother/sister" should be used rather than "adoptive parent/mother/father/brother/sister". When the need arises to explain adoption to children, talking about the birth parent "making an adoption plan" is more appropriate than saying the child was "given away" or "put up for adoption" (Meese, 2002; Pertman, 2000; PASS, 2013; Schoettle, 2003).

Teachers should aim to foster an inclusive, respectful and tolerant classroom which values the diverse backgrounds of all children (Meese, 2002). This can be done by confidently leading class discussions, by rephrasing incorrect or insensitive

terminology used by other children, and by redirecting questions and comments toward the facts about adoption rather than children's personal adoption stories (Schoettle, 2003). In this way, teachers can sensitively educate their students about adoption as another way of forming a family, model appropriate ways of discussing the issues, and support the individual adoptee.

2.5.5 Curriculum

Common school assignments and tasks

Meese (2002), Schoettle (2003) and (Ng, 2006) agree that many traditional activities or occasions celebrated in school classrooms may be difficult or even impossible for adoptees to complete and can trigger emotional responses. This is particularly so for children in younger grades who have not gained sufficient maturity to manage their responses to these tasks. These include "adopt-a-pet" projects, family trees, autobiographies, time lines, mother's day, baby pictures and inherited characteristics, family heritage and sexuality. For many children, including those in single-parent families, divorced-parent families, foster or adoptive families, these projects and activities often exaggerate differences, "reveal private information, and highlight missing information" (Schoettle, p. 31).

Discussions or tasks associated with fairy tales, children's books or popular movies may also raise adoption issues which need to be addressed and managed by the teacher. Fairy tales such as *"Cinderella"* and *"Snow White"* portray mothers who mistreat their children (in particular step-mothers) as evil and sometimes as witches. Movies such as *"Stuart Little"* promote the myth that birth parents may reappear at any time and take the child away. News reports or TV series often highlight the plight of orphans or include themes of loss, search and reunion. Many of these can be frightening for children and may require the teacher to highlight biases or correct misinformation while being sensitive to the adoptee in the classroom (Schoettle, 2003, p. 17).

In contrast, Huh and Reid's (2000) study of 40 Korean school-age children's experiences revealed that older children (aged 12-14), when given the chance to select a country to study at school, often demonstrate great ethnic pride by selecting their birth country to research and present. One child in this study, for example, said,

"I get to tell people about South Korea. I am just real proud because I know a lot of stuff, and I am teaching everybody else about it" (p. 84).

Common classroom activities which focus on the family can prove challenging for some adoptees. Some children were abandoned with little or no information about their birth family. Others spent their early years in an institution (Australian Government, AGD, 2013b). Careful consideration of the goals embedded in the emerging Australian Curriculum, however, reveals opportunities for teachers to normalise family diversity in their class. Teachers should endeavour to be sensitive to children's backgrounds, their level of understanding and their confidence in sharing personal histories with others. Teachers then may avoid inadvertently responding to lesson plans or displaying attitudes "that can hurt children's feelings, perpetuate inaccurate stereotypes, and transmit the message that some families (i.e. those formed through biology) are more normal and acceptable than others" (Livingston-Smith & Riley, 2006, p. 2).

Furthermore, when teachers are knowledgeable about potential issues, sensitive, accepting and respectful of the diverse range of families, including adoptive families, they will gain greater awareness of their own attitudes and behaviours and will be able to shape those of their students (Taymans et al., 2008). Crucial to the successful implementation of family-focused units is the timely and constructive collaboration between teachers and families. It should be noted, however, that each adoptive family will determine the amount of information to disclose to their children's school. This should be respected by school staff and supported in situations involving other students and parents (Schoettle, 2003; Wood & Ng, 2001).

2.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Globally, the number of ICAs has declined (Selman, 2012). Historical and government perspectives, research abroad on adoption-related trauma, grief and loss, and changing societal attitudes have all influenced this decline in Australia. However, despite the millions of children who are currently in adoptive families globally, researchers agree that there is very little information or training to support education professionals who currently work with these children and their families at school (Baker, 2013; Donalds, 2012; Javier, Baden, Biafora, & Camacho-Gingerich,

2007; Taymans et al., 2008). Limited empirical data has been gathered by Australian researchers due to the legal family status afforded adoptees after they join their adoptive families and to changing government priorities regarding child welfare and safety.

According to Gray (2009, p. 217), post-adoption "social and personal support" needs further development. Baker (2013) suggests that teacher preparation programs may provide an ideal opportunity to broaden awareness about the common and the unique circumstances which adoptive families may bring to the school community so they are better prepared to manage sensitive or complex issues in their classrooms. Similarly, investigating the prior knowledge, understanding and experiences of teachers in regard to family diversity issues (including adoptive families) as well as the impact that their values, beliefs and backgrounds bring to that understanding would further enhance the findings from this study.

The literature shows that children who have joined their families through ICA experience many of the typical developmental milestones of childhood. Indeed, many intercountry adoptees "catch up" (Rutter, 1998) with little or no obvious negative post-adoption impacts. For some, adoption is a successful intervention which enhances children's IQ and school performance (van Ijzendoorn & Juffer, 2005). However, many factors have been identified which may impact on the adoptee's school experience, including the age they joined their family, the impact of pre-adoptive experiences, the time and relationships developed within the family prior to starting school, and their access to post-adoption support.

Some adoptees may experience difficulties at school and require additional support and understanding from school personnel. Some may be impacted by their pre-adoption experiences (Judge, 2004), while others may lack the "psychological tools" such as conceptual language skills (Gindis, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978; Vygotsky, Hanfmann, & Vakar, 2012), and may experience delays or fall behind academically. Like immigrant children, adoptees experience instances of institutional and individual racism, both subtle and overt, intentional and unintentional, as a result of taken-for-granted practices, or from other children and teachers (Aveling, 2007; Charles, et al., 2014; Hübinette & Tigervall, 2009; Hübinette et al., 2009; Huh, 1997; Huh & Reid, 2000; Tigervall & Hübinette, 2010). As children's understanding and

acceptance of their adoption story changes over time, some may experience varying degrees of grief and loss (Brodzinsky, 2011; Brodzinsky et al., 1992).

As children mature, their sense of identity and self-concept may be challenged (Arminio, 2010; Bandura, 1977, 1997). This may be significant for adoptees as they compare themselves to their peers and strive to belong in various social, cultural and racial contexts. Children who are of a different race and cultural background to their parents may have further issues in relation to "family differentiation" to contend with (Baden & Steward, 2007). This is particularly evident when intercountry adoptees begin school (Meese, 2002; Schoettle, 2003).

Adoptive parents and communities are as "heterogeneous and fluid as any other" (Gray, 2009, p. 10), with parents' attitudes, values and beliefs varying in relation to how to assimilate their child's birth culture and adoption experience into their personal history (Brodzinsky, 2006; Gray, 2009; Pertman, 2006). Adoptive parents' pre-adoption preparation, their knowledge and understanding of adoption issues as they pertain to their child, and their ability and willingness to communicate these issues to others will make a difference to the way in which they collaborate with education professionals.

This examination of the school experience of intercountry adoptees aims to raise awareness about the impact of pre-adoption experience on the children's school experience and to highlight the many factors that can influence positive or negative outcomes at school. It will also suggest effective mechanisms for collaboration and ongoing support and provide impetus for future research into teacher understanding of the diverse nature of families and inclusive practices which may support these and other marginalised groups at school.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Attachment Theory provides a starting point from which to consider the short and long-term effects of secure and insecure attachments to a primary care-giver. This thesis will particularly identify some of the major issues that impinge on the intercountry adoptee's experience. Trauma Theory, informed by neurodevelopmental science, in particular brain research, expands and elaborates on Attachment Theory in light of recent research, with particular attention to the implications for schooling. Examples of the distinctive particularities of adoptees' experiences in school provide a critical context for this discussion. Child Development Theory, particularly Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Personality Development, when combined with clinical understandings of adoptees' experiences, sheds light on some specific potential developmental and psychological changes which adoptees may experience. Social Construction Theory gives insight into the current social and cultural milieu of schools in Australia today, as well as academic considerations which may impact specifically on adoptees' experiences.

3.2 CHAPTER ORGANISATION

This chapter conceptualises a multi-theory framework, as illustrated in Figure 3.1, for examining the school experiences of children adopted from overseas countries. It begins with an introductory statement explaining the overall integrated approach taken. It then proceeds to outline the various theoretical elements of that approach, namely, Attachment Theory, Trauma Theory, Child Development Theory and Social Construction Theory. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the contribution of each theory to this thesis and a summary of salient issues.

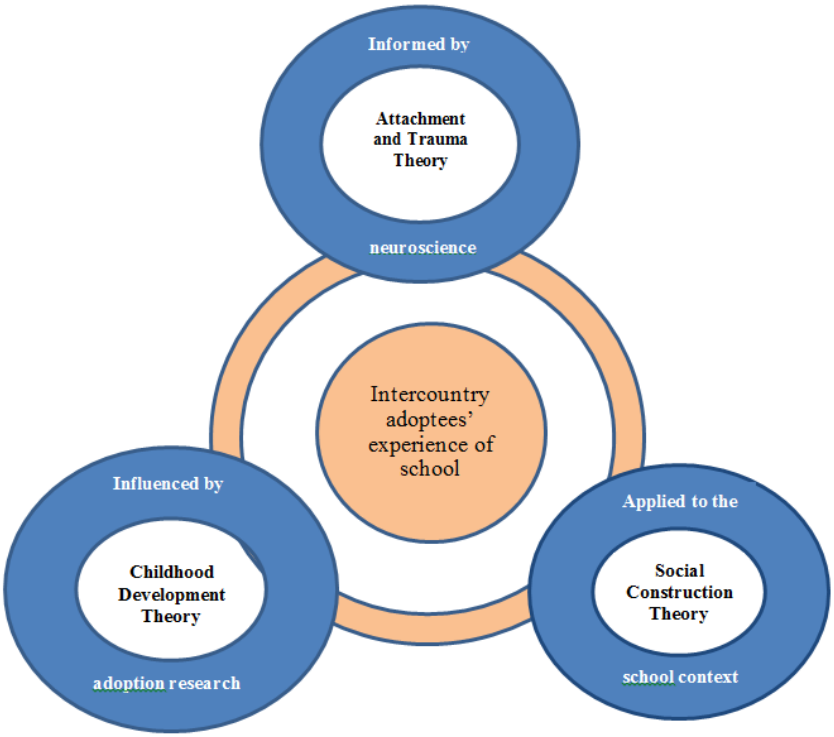


Figure 3.1. A multi-theory framework for examining the school experience of intercountry adoptees.

3.3 THEORISING THE INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTEE'S SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

Understanding the complexity of adoptees' experiences from children and parents' perspectives, while taking into account pre- and post-adoption, psychosocial, academic and racial/cultural experiences within the social context of schools, involves more than one theoretical perspective. The evolution of theory in relation to this study is a work in progress, commencing with and supported by a growing body of knowledge about parent/caregiver attachments and the impact of traumatic experience on child and adolescent development.

Recent evidence-based scientific postulations applied to clinical work and field research provide a greater understanding of alternative developmental trajectories for children who have experienced an atypical and challenging start to life. Much of this work focuses on the impact of traumatic experiences on brain development, brain functioning and body systems, suggesting ways of working with these children to mediate adverse outcomes. Schore and Schore (2008) argue that Regulation Theory, applied to clinical therapeutic social work, is a modern take on Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1958) in light of almost two decades of "interdisciplinary developmental and neurobiological research", which now encompasses the "relationship between the

brain/mind, body of both infant and caregiver held within a culture and environment that supports or threatens it" (p. 10). Perry's (2006) Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics, addressing the issue of developmental maltreatment of children, proposes a "developmentally-sensitive, neurobiologically informed approach to clinical work" (Barfield, Dobson, Gaskill & Perry, 2012, p. 30; see also Perry, 2006). This approach can inform clinicians and educators to enable them to work alongside parents and caregivers to select and implement "developmentally appropriate enrichment, educational and therapeutic activities" which replicate the child's neural organisation in a developmentally timely and repetitive way (Barfield et al., pp. 31-32).

Howard (2013, p. 19) integrates theory to shed further light on the "complex worlds" of children who demonstrate "concerning and perplexing behaviours" in school, by combining Attachment Theory, Trauma Theory and Child Development Theory. These theories are relevant to this study of intercountry adoptees' experience in school. Attachment Theory as postulated by John Bowlby (1958, 1969, 1982) and Mary Ainsworth (1963, 1967) provides insight into early and ongoing challenges for adoptees who have experienced disrupted attachments early in life. Trauma Theory, informed by advances in neurodevelopment and neuroscience, draws heavily from the work of Bruce Perry and colleagues (1995, 2002, 2006, 2009, 2015) and Dave Ziegler (2011) as they illuminate the importance of pre-natal and early childhood experiences on the developing brain and child, and the ongoing impact of trauma on learning, behaviour and relationships. This thesis acknowledges the limitations of Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of childhood personality development (1969); however, when combined with adoption research, Erikson's theory helps to compare and contrast the atypical experiences of adoptees with their non-adopted peers at various "typical" stages of development. In the context of schools, Social Construction Theory (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 1995, 2015; Crotty, 2012; Gergen, 1985; Geertz, 1973) helps to interrogate both the collective intersubjective[10] experiences and the subjective nature of individual realities as "truth" in relation to adoptive families' lived experience. It also frames the examination of the historical

[10] Intersubjectivity has been defined by scholars in various ways, including: "shared" or "mutual understanding" "acts of empathy" which lead to reciprocal understanding; "trading places", and "the sense of belonging to a community" even in the absence of others (Duranti, 2010, pp. 13-14).

(prior knowledge and experience), social (language, communication/interaction) and cultural influences (habitualised actions, assumptions, stereotypes) on institutionalised practices, behaviours and relationships.

3.4 EXAMINING THE INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTEE'S EXPERIENCE OF PRIMARY SCHOOL

3.4.1 Attachment and trauma theory

Attachment Theory has been confirmed by research in numerous fields that draw on principles of human development. That is why Bowlby (for example, 1958, 1963, 1969, 1973) and Ainsworth (for example, 1963, 1979), in particular, feature in the following discussion of Attachment Theory. Recent literature has highlighted that advances in technology and neuroscience are rapidly influencing research and clinical understanding of the complex developmental issues for children with trauma histories (Twardosz, & Lutzker, 2009). This thesis will not attempt a detailed explanation of this complex and scientific field; however, an overview of salient issues will shed some light on possible issues for intercountry adoptees as they experience school.

Attachment theory

Perry (2001) defines attachment as the "special bond" which is emotionally enduring in "maternal-infant or primary caregiver-infant relationships" (p. 2), which provides an infant with a sense of "safety, comfort, soothing and pleasure". Threat to or loss of that relationship may cause intense distress. Clinicians and researchers agree that this special relationship sets the scene for future healthy or unhealthy relationships[11] throughout the lifespan (Bowlby, 1958; Perry, ibid)

John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth were credited with the development of Attachment Theory, in particular, the attachment patterns which indicate the degree to which a child uses their primary caregiver as a secure base (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1988). This theory forms a strong foundation from which to consider the impact of the early life, pre-adoption experiences of internationally adopted children and their post-adoption adjustment prior to and after commencing school. An "open-

[11] Both Bowlby and Perry argue that a "secure" attachment to a primary care-giver, usually the mother, influences positive and productive relationships later in life. The opposite, "insecure" attachments with a primary care-giver, lead to poorer relational outcomes later in life.

ended theory", it draws on various scientific disciplines including psychology, systems theory and biological science (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991, p.340).

Bowlby's research into the prolonged experiences of separation or deprived maternal care on a child's developing personality emphasises the importance of early secure attachments in infants (Bowlby, 1958). He proposed that a baby's secure attachment occurs as a result of the adaptive interactions between baby and primary care-giver (usually the mother) which reinforce and strengthen the relationship. Genetically-driven attachment behaviours such as crying, babbling, sucking, smiling, clinging and following form part of a repertoire of "survival" strategies. In turn, the care-giver responds with cuddling, rocking, cooing and gazing at the infant. These reciprocal behaviours provide the foundation for secure attachments and a safe basis from which babies and toddlers explore their environment (Bowlby, 1958). Attachment occurs predominantly in the first year of life, as a result of a baby's needs being met "well enough and often enough by a consistent care-giver". However, not all children are given the opportunity to develop these necessary healthy attachments (PASS, 2013, p. 8).

Bowlby's research included the study of separation anxiety (Bowlby, 1960b, 1961b), and loss, grief and mourning in young children (Bowlby, 1960a, 1961a, 1963). Separation anxiety resulted when a child's attachment needs were not met due to the absence of a primary care-giver, resulting in intense anxiety which cannot be terminated by someone else. Bowlby also found that infants and young children are capable of experiencing anger, grief and mourning in response to the loss of their primary care-giver (Bowlby, 1960a, 1960b, 1961a, 1961b, 1963, 1969, 1973). His investigations into the impact of long institutional separation on children's attachments showed that insecure attachments often remained for years after the separation experience and impacted on children in a range of developmental domains. This has implications for young international adoptees during their primary school years.

Ainsworth's work added empirical evidence to Bowlby's Attachment Theory as she explored the variation of attachment experiences in cross-cultural contexts (Ainsworth, 1963; 1967; 1977). Most notably, Ainsworth and colleagues conducted a longitudinal study which observed mother-infant attachment behaviours in home environments during the first year after birth, followed by a 20 minute "strange

situation"[12] presented in a laboratory. This identified the individual differences in attachment relationships between mothers and their children and highlighted the secure attachments that take place when mothers respond sensitively and appropriately to a baby's needs during the first year of life (Ainsworth & Bell, 1969; 1970; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Ainsworth, M. D. S., & Wittig, B. A. 1969; Bell & Ainsworth, 1972).

A meta-analysis of attachment in intercountry adoptees confirmed that children adopted under the age of 12 months were securely attached to their adoptive parents. Those adopted after their first birthday showed signs of disorganised attachment, and this was comparable to children in foster care (van den Dries, et al., 2008). Consistency of care and low stress levels also influence a child's ability to develop future secure attachments and an overall sense of security (Niemann & Weiss, 2011). Internationally-adopted children have a variety of pre-adoption experiences and come from diverse cultural beginnings and backgrounds. Each child's attachment capabilities will vary as a result of pre- and post-adoption attachment opportunities. While one study showed that children who had few pre-adoption placements and lower stress levels experienced stronger attachment security, many such children have not experienced the security of one-on-one responsive care-giving in their first year of life (Niemann & Weiss, 2011). A study which considers the influence of attachment on intercountry adoptees must also acknowledge such variety of pre-adoption experience.

Separation anxiety, originally considered the result of being separated from a primary attachment figure, was found later to be activated by "expectant anxiety", or the anticipation of separation (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991, p. 336). Bowlby's third volume (1980) identified the anxiety that may result from accessing stored experience, leading to subconscious "defensive exclusion" of the separation experience (Ainsworth & Bowlby, p. 9). When these experiences are prolonged, primitive defensive responses may be activated, and the child may behave in such a way as to appear indifferent or detached. Behaviour may be misinterpreted as the

[12] The Strange Situation Procedure, developed by Mary Ainsworth, was a specialised clinical-research procedure involving separating and reuniting infants with their mothers several times. It was designed to determine the nature of the paired attachments (Perry, 2001. p. 10).

child simply being independent (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Ainsworth et al., 1978; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991).

Bowlby and Ainsworth have contributed significantly to the understanding of the attachment organisation and difficulties experienced by young adoptees, and are therefore often referred to in adoption research (for example, Brodzinsky, 1984, 1990, 2011; Brodzinsky, Schechter & Henig, 1992; McGinn, 2007; Meese, 2002; Purvis, Cross, & Sunshine, 2007). Anxiety-related behaviours demonstrated by intercountry adoptees at school, which may result from early life experience and implicit stored memories (see discussion of trauma memory, below), may cause varying degrees of difficulty for the child, requiring teacher/school understanding and flexibility. Intercountry adoptees have experienced loss and at least two disruptions to attachment (birth parent to institution and/or foster family to adoptive family) and in some cases multiple placements prior to adoption (PASS, 2013). Ainsworth and her colleagues developed a method of determining variations in mother-child attachments revealing four possible categories: securely attached, insecure/avoidant attachment, insecure/resistant attachment and insecure/disorganised or disoriented attachment (Ainsworth, 1979). Many adoptees become securely attached to their adoptive parents while some experience ongoing moderate attachment difficulties (PASS, 2013). "Expectant" anxiety or anticipatory stress (Sapolsky, 2004) for some intercountry adoptees may go beyond the common experience of separation anxiety experienced by non-adopted children who start school, leaving their parents for the first time. For adoptees, separation may initiate heightened concerns about family security and permanence, and may recur at various junctures throughout their primary school experience.

As attachments typically form in infancy and early childhood, it is understandable that the implications of insecure attachment for this group of primary school children may not be understood by educators, nor easily identifiable, and that further consideration of the causes of children's behaviours, including anxiety, may be necessary. Consideration of the pre-adoption experiences of the children in this study, and of their previous attachments including the time and opportunity to develop secure attachments with their adoptive parents, is relevant to their adjustment and transition to school. In particular, when children were adopted closer-to-school age, and attachment and bonding time with their new families was limited

before commencing school, this may have a flow-on effect at school. Attention to carefully planned transition programs may be necessary. Other considerations such as the use of some commonly used behaviour management strategies which withdraw or isolate children from contact with others may also perpetuate a continued sense of rejection in some children.

Since early conceptions of Attachment Theory, studies and government statistics in various countries have shown the increased prevalence of the maltreatment of children, most commonly as a result of abuse and neglect. For example, Perry cites several studies in the 1990s in the United States which revealed "millions of maltreated children and youth in the educational, mental health, child protective, and juvenile justice systems" (Perry, 2009, p. 241). More recently, Australian statistics confirm a steady increase in children and adolescents entering out-of-home care arrangements (AIHW, 2015). Current research efforts extend and elaborate on Attachment Theory and provide greater understanding of children who have experienced various forms of trauma early in life. Understanding the short- and long-term effects of trauma and disorganised attachment on human development, in particular, the brain and specific systems of the body, provides greater insight into some possible outcomes for the internationally adopted child.

Trauma theory

Terr (1991) was among the first to distinguish characteristics of childhood trauma types, identifying Type I trauma (the result of a "single, sudden and unexpected" event) and Type II trauma (resulting from "longstanding or repeated ordeals") (p. 11). Type I trauma includes a single event such as witnessing a horrifying incident, and ongoing symptoms resemble those diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (see Gupta & Gupta, 2014). Generally, children who experience a single traumatic event "do not often forget" but will relive and rework the experience in their minds to determine a reason for the event, recalling and describing it in precise detail (Terr, p. 14). Type II trauma, more commonly referred to as complex trauma, is multifaceted and may include, *inter alia*, emotional, sexual and physical abuse, witnessing domestic violence or war atrocities (Cook et al., 2005), which generate emotions such as "an absence of feeling, a sense of rage, or unremitting sadness" (Terr, p. 16). Ford and Courtois (2009, 2013) added that complex trauma involves exposure to severe stressors resulting from abandonment or

harm initiated by caregivers or other adults at developmentally vulnerable and critical periods of childhood or adolescence, when brain development is rapid or being consolidated.

When left untreated, "all but the mildest of the childhood traumas last for years", and may lead to "a number of different diagnoses" (Terr, p. 19). It has become apparent that the symptoms evident in children exposed to complex traumatic experiences are often misdiagnosed according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) criteria as acute trauma (PTSD) (Kliethermes, Schacht & Drewy, 2014) or as a multitude of conditions, including "depression, attention-deficit/hyper-activity disorder (ADHD), oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), conduct disorder, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, sleep disorders, communication disorders, separation anxiety disorder, and reactive attachment disorder" (Cook et al., 2005, p. 391-2). These conditions do not capture the complexity of the relational and self-regulatory difficulties experienced by severely traumatised children (Perry, Pollard, Blakley, Baker & Vigilante, 1995).[13] More recently, the DSM-5 has made some attempt to broaden the PTSD criteria which "may be able to more comprehensively include youth with complex trauma" (Kliethermes et al., 2014, p. 344). When trauma is unresolved over a long period, it can lead to "perpetual mourning and depression" (Terr, p. 18). Research highlights the protective nature of adoption, and evidence suggests that, over time, many adoptees develop resilience, experience healing, and have significant developmental gains (see Gunnar et al., 2000; McGuinness et al., 2000; Rutter, 1998). Other adoptees, however, may have experienced a combination of trauma types as a result of relinquishment, abandonment, institutionalisation, and in some cases, various forms of abuse or neglect. The co-existence of multiple forms of maltreatment has been referred to by others as "Multitype Maltreatment" (Higgins & McCabe, 2000) and "Polyvictimisation" (Finkelhor, Ormrod & Turner, 2007).

[13] Perry (2015) concurred that the DSM has been reviewed in the United States and was found to be limited to clinical presentations that, while reliable and consistent, are not valid as a "descriptive and symptom focused'" diagnostic system. Hence, the Research Domain Criteria (RDoC) is the new research framework now being used by the National Institute of Mental Health in the U. S. as a more appropriate system of diagnosing mental disorders (Transforming Childhood Trauma, Bruce Perry Tour, 2015, Sydney, 29 October, 2015).

Trauma, the brain and the intercountry adoptee

"You can take the child out of the trauma, but it is much more difficult to take the trauma out of the child" (Ziegler, 2011, p. 44). There is sufficient evidence-based research on brain development and functioning to establish the disruptive nature of trauma and disorganised attachment on the development of a child's brain and on related systems of the body (Giedd, Shaw, Wallace, Gogtay & Lenroot, 2006; Teicher et al., 2004). Increasingly, the research focuses on maltreated and traumatised children, which is informing therapeutic work aimed at helping their recovery (see Ford & Courtois, 2009, 2013; Perry, Pollard, Blakley, Baker & Vigilante, 1995, Perry, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2009; Purvis, Cross, Danserau & Parris, 2013; Purvis, Parris & Cross, 2011; Schore, 2001; Ziegel, 2011).

Research into the neurodevelopmental outcomes of internationally adopted children as a result of early adversity is relatively new (Gunnar & Kertes, 2005). However, theoretical and clinical research into the concept of complex trauma (Cook et al., 2005; Kliethermes, Schacht, & Drewry, 2014) and its effect on the brains of young and vulnerable children (Perry, 1995, 2002, 2006; Schore, 2001; Siegel, 1999; Ziegler, 2011) provides a greater understanding of the ongoing relational and regulatory difficulties which may also persist in some intercountry adoptees (Tottenham et al., 2010). Like Bowlby, Perry sees attachment work as so critical in the first year of life because of the simultaneous development of specific brain "systems and structures" which shape a child's "core attachment capabilities" (empathy, sharing, caring) in order to facilitate healthy relationships:

> Without predictable, responsive, nurturing and sensory-enriched caregiving, the infant's potential for normal bonding and attachments will be unrealized. The brain systems responsible for healthy emotional relationships will not develop in an optimal way without the right kinds of experiences at the right times in life (Perry, 1995, p. 3)

It is important not to pathologise these or other children with trauma histories, as many do well and indeed thrive in their new families (Gunnar & Kertes, 2005). Some insight, however, into the implications of known or possible past traumatic experience for the children in this study will help to understand some of their behavioural, social and academic experiences within the context of the school.

Commonly, discussions of trauma begin by examining the development and function of various parts of the human brain to provide some basic understanding of the causes and the short and long term effects of trauma on children's development (see Howard, 2013; Perry, 2002; Ziegler, 2011). The brain's primary parts develop in a hierarchical and sequential order, with each part having a "critical period" or window of opportunity for the optimal development of specific skills and abilities. If the "window" closes and development is not attained during the critical period, children will have to work much harder to develop these skills (Perry, 1995, 2002; Ziegler, 2011). The critical periods of brain development can be negatively influenced by many factors, a fact particularly pertinent to this study of intercountry adoptees. Children adopted from developing countries are more likely to have been exposed to various forms of parental neglect resulting from transgenerational poverty, poor maternal health and malnutrition, and deficient care (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007), leading to effects on formative brain development. This entails potential long-term effects including premature birth, impaired growth, a heightened response to stress and general overall anxiety (Ziegler, 2011; Sapolsky, 2004). Other ongoing issues related to brain development which may result from early neglect-induced trauma include "cortical atrophy" (Perry, 1995), arrested emotional age (Ziegler, 2011), socio-emotional dysfunction (Perry, 2002) and impaired reasoning and thought processes (Ziegler, 2011). An understanding of such influences on brain development has implications for children who have experienced trauma as a result of neglect and a lack of stimulation prior to or while in an institutional setting.

The nervous system

"Traumatized children often do things that do not make logical sense" (Ziegler, 2011, p. 63). Children who constantly operate in survival mode respond to stress in ways that can be difficult for adults to understand, which can cause problems for these children at school.

> As the neural firing becomes repetitively stressful, other aspects of experience, such as emotions, are coded into memory as threatening and terrorizing to the child. With a central preoccupation on survival, every other experience is either of less importance or entirely irrelevant (Ziegler, p.43).

The Sympathetic Nervous System in traumatised children is activated in response to a perceived threat. Children respond in various ways along a "trauma-response continuum" (Perry et al., 1995), ranging from hyper-arousal to dissociative responses. For example, a child may function in a hyper-aroused state, leading to a "fight" (aggressive/violent/ distractible behaviours) response. When challenged by a teacher, the pattern of behaviour will often proceed with "resistance, then defiance, and finally aggression" in an attempt to stop the teacher exerting control over them (Ziegler, 2011, p. 74). At the other end of the continuum, they may "flee" or "freeze" (run away or dissociate) from the threat. Some children will internalize behaviour and demonstrate "dissociative" behaviours which may follow the pattern: avoidance, compliance, dissociation and even losing consciousness. This may be the response of a child who has had little or no power over their situation previously and has learned to "leave the situation in a psychological way rather than a physical way" (Ziegler, p.75).

Deprivation of experience

Often children who have been deprived of experience in their early years through abuse and/or neglect (including institutionalisation) have not had the opportunity to learn effectively through play or to socialise with friends. They tend to have under-developed social skills and may lack interest in playing with other children. Traumatised children may find lunch breaks at school a time of dysregulation, often becoming an aggressor or a victim. Similarly, evidence suggests that the emotional age of seriously traumatized children may be arrested at the time of the initial trauma, for example, "a sixteen-year-old, highly intelligent adolescent may be stuck in the emotions and experience of a four-year-old traumatized child" (Ziegler, 2011, p. 53). These aspects of school may be pertinent to the experiences of the children in this study.

The role of memory

The distinction between "implicit" and "explicit" memory (Siegel, 1999) is also important. Explicit memories such as the recall of facts, events, names, places, experiences are consciously processed and acted upon in a deliberate and reasoned manner using the higher brain functions (of the neocortex). In contrast, implicit memories are automatically stored from the time of birth, are not linked to previous experience, and are stored in the parts of the brain (the brain stem and limbic system)

governed primarily by survival instinct and emotions (Ziegler, 2011). Evidence suggests that traumatised children operate primarily from the limbic system, and have difficulty with executive functions. Early traumatic memories may be implicit, are generally deeply embedded, and may involve the recollection of "feelings and frightening sensations" which "promote[s] a very broad association with future experiences, linking them to past traumas" (Ziegler, p. 34, 46). Terr (1991) argues, that children who have experienced trauma, even at a very young age, typically "visualize", "re-enact" and carry "trauma-related fears" into adulthood (Terr, p. 11, 13). According to Ziegler (p. 60), this internal "state memory" ensures that the body remembers feelings, sounds, smells, and sensations which the "cortical memory" cannot. Intercountry adoptees who have experienced fear, threat or neglect at a young age have implicit memories which may be revived in some form later in life (see also Valent, 1998; van der Kolk, 1996). Children adopted beyond infancy and/or closer to school age will also have explicit memories which may impact on them at home and school.

Trauma theory is slowly permeating the education profession as teachers seek ways of engaging more productively with children from troubled backgrounds who demonstrate challenging behaviours at school. Howard (2013) wrote: "It is vital that schools grow in their understanding of trauma and attachment-related issues and research-supported behaviour management approaches" (p. 91). Parents, clinicians and educators are being urged to work together in a co-ordinated effort based on sound neurodevelopmental research to understand and support the needs of these children (Perry, 2015). One of the first considerations is to determine what the children have missed developmentally and to start working from there.

3.4.2 Childhood development theory

In the field of psychology, the term "development" refers to the "orderly, adaptive changes that occur in human beings (or animals) between conception and death" across a range of areas including physical, social, emotional and cognitive domains (Woolfolk & Margetts, 2016, p. 68). Factors such as an individual's rate of growth and maturation, environmental factors and psychological well-being influence development (ibid). For those children who have experienced "structural neglect" (including inadequate resourcing, staffing, and social and emotional interactions with caregivers) as a result of being raised for an extended period of time

in an institution, there is inconclusive evidence to determine the extent to which environment and "specific genetic, temperamental, and physical characteristics of the individual child" are critical in reversing the scars which may remain (Huang & Invernizzi, 2012, p. 26)

Erikson's theory of psychosocial development

Erik Erikson's Psychosocial theory of healthy personality development across the lifespan (Erikson, 1959, 1963) and his work on the crisis of identity in late adolescence (Erikson, 1968, 1980) has influenced adoption researchers, clinical psychologists (see Brodzinsky et al., 1998; McGinn, 2007; Rosenberg, 1992), social workers and medical practitioners who work with adoptive families. Support programs also draw on such developmental theories to assist parents to understand the potential challenges for their children at different ages as compared to non-adopted children[14].

Erikson's theory has been applied to clinical research in an attempt to understand how the adoption experience may impact on adoptees throughout the various stages of life. Most notably, Brodzinsky et al., (1992) in their seminal work, *"Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self"* highlight the "typical" issues faced by adoptees at various stages of development. Numerous others have explored school-based issues which may impact on adoptees at various stages of their schooling (see Brodzinsky & Pertman, 2011; Brodzinsky et al., 1998; Dalen, 2002, 2007; Dalen & Rygvold, 2006; Fishman & Harrington, 2007; Grotevant, 1997; Huh, 1997; McGinn, 2007; Meese, 2002; Schoettle, 2003)**.** Given that this focus on the child's psychological development and adjustment across the lifespan continues to inform many who work in the adoption field, an awareness of how children's age and stage of development may impact on their school experience is relevant to this study. In light of the insights provided by attachment and trauma theory, however, "typical" developmental milestones are more likely to apply to children adopted at a young age. Some "atypical" development is more likely to occur in older adoptees who have experienced significant disrupted attachments, prolonged periods of institutionalisation, or other pre-adoption adversities (Gunnar et al., 2007; Julian,

[14] See explanation of the W.I.S.E. Up! program in Chapter 2.

2013; Rutter, 1998; Rutter, Colvert et al., 2007; Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1996a; Verhulst, 2000).

Erikson's (1959, 1980) theory of psychosocial development consists of eight stages of development through which, it is argued, people typically pass from birth to late adulthood at approximated ages. Erikson described particular challenges (or crises) that should be mastered at each stage in order for healthy development to occur, with failure to master these challenges potentially leading to later difficulties in adulthood. The approximate stages, ages and challenges outlined by Erikson's (1959, 1980) psychosocial theory are outlined in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1

*Erikson's stages of Psychosocial Development (*Adapted from Crain, 2011, p. 286, and Brodzinsky, 2011).

Stages	Approximate Age	Challenges (Crises)
Infancy	Birth - 1	Basic Trust Versus Basic Mistrust
Toddlerhood	18 months - 3	Autonomy Versus Shame and doubt
Preschool years	3 – 5	Initiative Versus Guilt
Middle childhood	6 – 12	Industry Versus Inferiority
Adolescence	13 – 18	Identity Versus Role Confusion
Young adulthood	18 – 40	Intimacy Versus Isolation
Adulthood	40 – 65	Generativity Versus Stagnation
Old age	65 – death	Ego Integrity Versus Despair

The following discussion connects Erikson's stages of development, in particular, the middle childhood years, to the adoptee's experience of primary school.

Infancy

Like Bowlby, Erikson (1980) claimed that a child's experience of having their basic needs met in the first year of life establishes the foundation for trusting others and for feelings of self-worth; it is the "cornerstone of a healthy personality" (p. 58). It is the "mutual regulation", the sensitive and responsive relationship between a primary caregiver and child which ensures that basic needs are being met, that is crucial to a child's view of the world and to developing positive relationships with others (Erikson, pp. 60, 61). Bowlby (1980) agreed that it is this secure relationship during infancy that predicts socio-emotional and cognitive success later in life.

Erikson's theory is supported by adoption researchers (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Juffer & van IjIjzendoornzendoorn, 2009; Rutter, 1998) who have found that age at adoption (over 6 months) and pre-adoption experiences (e.g. multiple placements, trauma, drug exposure *in utero*, other health issues) can impact on the secure attachment of children to their adoptive families and can have long term effects on the children at school.

Toddlerhood

Success in this stage of a child's development is dependent on the previously acquired sense of trust with the primary caregiver (Erikson, 1959, 1980). A child who is allowed to gain a "sense of self-control without loss of self-esteem" experiences a sense of autonomy and pride. Conversely, a child who does not develop self-control and self-esteem may regress to earlier childhood practices such as thumb sucking and other obsessive-compulsive behaviours, leading to feelings of shame and self-doubt (Erikson, 1980, p. 70).

Studies show that these types of regressive behaviours may be evident in post-institutionalised children who have spent more than 6 months (Rutter, 1998) in an institution, and may persist for some time following placement in their adoptive family. Depending on the child's age and how long they have had to adjust in their new families prior to commencing school, these behaviours may continue to impact on their school experience. According to Price (cited in Meese, 2002, p. 53) developmental or physical issues may not become apparent until 2-3 years after placement in their family, while emotional issues may take even longer to surface. In addition to developing motor skills and muscular control, a child at this age is also acquiring language and representational skills (Fishman & Harrington, 2007, p.258). Children adopted by their families closer to school age will have had varying degrees of exposure to their adoptive language which may impact on the transition to school and to their learning at school.

Children adopted in the first six months of life may experience Erikson's first two stages of development. However, children adopted over the age of three will not have experienced Erikson's stage one and two within their adoptive families, but will have experienced attachment disruption.

Preschool years

The "crisis" at this age (beginning around 3 years old) is in children becoming aware of themselves in relation to others and in learning to communicate appropriately in social situations (Vygotsky, 1998). This is critical in terms of preparing children to enter school (Mahn, 2003). The combination of greater mobility, developing language skills and imagination inspires children at this age to ask numerous questions about their environment (Erikson, 1959, 1980). As well as beginning to interact and relate to other children their own age, they also start to note differences between others and themselves.

According to Meese (2002), when children adopted from overseas first arrive home they may "actively resist" going to places with other groups of children such as playgroups or being left by their parents at kindergarten or pre-school, for fear of being abandoned or "left with the other children as before" (p. 59). Still others may grieve in these settings for past friendships lost. Meese explains that children's relationships with other children in an orphanage setting are often more like those of brother or sister than friend, and the loss felt may be significant. Often the post-institutionalised child may exhibit behaviours consistent with a much lower than chronological age. This may have implications for appropriate year-level and class placement (Meese, 2002). Seemingly inappropriate behaviours such as throwing tantrums may also be misinterpreted by teachers or parents as misbehaviour rather than an outcome of "culture shock" and institutionalisation (Meese, p. 65)

Furthermore, children around this age begin to ask questions about birth and reproduction and for adoptees who are aware of their adoptive status this means assimilating the knowledge of being born to another into their personal history (Brodzinsky, 2011; Fishman & Harrington, 2007). Children also begin to identify issues surrounding "family differentiation" especially as they approach school age (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002), in particular the obvious physical differences between themselves and their adoptive family members (Brodzinsky, 2011; Macrae, 2006). Meese (p. 61) suggests that children adopted at this age may have little or no concept of what a "family" is or what the roles within one are. This has implications for the Australian curriculum units which focus on the family in both the prep year and grade one (see discussion in Curriculum experiences section, Chapter 2).

Research shows that generally parents begin to share meaningful information about their children's adoption with them in age-appropriate ways prior to starting school, and contemporary adoption practices support this (Brodzinsky, 2006, 2011; Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002; Macrae, 2006; Melina, 1998; Pertman, 2006). At this age most children generally enjoy hearing their stories and are usually happy to tell others that they were "dopted", sharing experiences such as "my mummy and daddy got me in China. We flew on a big plane." (Schoettle, 2003, p. 8). However, their explanations may be vague and confused as their understanding of what adoption means and its implications is limited. Similarly, issues of ethnicity or national differentiation are generally "too abstract for young children to comprehend" (Huh & Reid, 2000, p. 80).

Sometimes experiences shared by young adoptees incite confusion or natural curiosity in other children, leading to comments and questions such as, "Where is your *real* mummy?" At other times questions may be directed to the parent or grandparent when they come to collect the child from school as this may be the first time that the physical differences are noticed: "Why doesn't he look like you?" or "Are you his grandpa?" (often directed at "older" adoptive parents) (Schoettle, 2003, p. 9). This highlights for the young adoptee the "different" nature of their family and may cause some anxiety (Brodzinsky, 1990; Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Meese, 2002, p. 61). Meese (2002) and Schoettle (2003) suggest that talking about "family" may be the best place for parents and early years teachers to start conversations with all young children prior to talking about adoption as one way to form a family.

Middle childhood

The primary school years represent a time when children experience either a sense of industry or a sense of inferiority (Erikson, 1959, 1980). According to Snowman, McCown, and Biehler (2011, p. 75), by this stage children have generally formed their "self-image" and are able to interpret their feelings and experiences, for example, "I'm happy, I'm unhappy, I'm angry" (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 291). This is a time of rapid cognitive, social and physical growth when children begin to compare and differentiate themselves from others (Fishman & Harrington, 2007). It is also a time when "profound changes" in children's behaviour may be mistaken by teachers as "wilful" and "disruptive" (Mahn, 2003, p. 131). Children in the middle years of

school become more aware of racial and individual differences and begin to develop their own set of morals and values (Marotz & Allen, 2013).

While many adoptees experience similar developmental growth to their non-adopted peers, changes in cognitive and socio-emotional growth impact on their "understanding of and adjustment to adoption" (Brodzinsky, 2011, p. 4; see also Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002). For adoptees, greater cognitive understanding brings with it a deeper awareness of the implications of adoption and the realisation that in order to be adopted they first experienced significant losses which may include loss of birth family, culture, language, genealogy and identity (Brodzinsky, 1990, 2011; Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Fishman & Harrington, 2007). According to Brodzinsky (2011), adoption-related loss is believed by many psychologists to be at the core of emotional adjustment in adoptees (see also Brodzinsky, 1990; Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002; Leon, 2002; Nickman, 1985)**.**

Children experiencing unresolved grief in relation to their adoption may experience a sense of rejection or feel exaggeratedly different (Melina, 1998) or exhibit feelings of "confusion, anxiety and sadness" (Brodzinsky, 2011, p. 5). **S**ome may even fear that they will be returned to or reclaimed by birth family (Brodzinsky, 1984). At school and home these feelings may manifest themselves in behavioural difficulties such as being argumentative or excessively angry, or being unable to focus on assigned tasks (Brodzinsky et al., 1992). Language delays may impact on children's academic ability and self-esteem, causing them to fall further behind in their school work (Gindis, 2005; Glennen, 2006; Meese, 2002).

When children begin school, the curiosity of others often leads to inappropriate comments or invasive questions that are difficult for adoptees to manage. Children may need assistance to develop strategies to empower them to respond to comments and questions through programs such as the W.I.S.E. Up Program (Schoettle, 2001, 2003). Also, some traditional primary school curriculum units and tasks can cause concern for adoptees, particularly in the younger grades (Meese, 2002; Schoettle, 2003; Wood & Ng, 2001). Teachers should be aware that these issues may impact on the children's confidence at school and on their general self-esteem.

Adolescence

According to Erikson (1959, 1980), of prime concern to adolescents (in upper primary and lower secondary school) is their social role including how they appear to

others and their distinct need to belong. While there is a natural tendency for increased autonomy and decreased parental involvement in school during adolescence (Appleyard et al., 2005), there is evidence to suggest the significant benefits of parental involvement in school in raising children's achievement levels (Becker-Weidman, 2009a). The crisis in adolescence, however, is whether or not others see them in the same way as they see themselves. Mahn (2003, p. 134) states that "the adolescent's identity revolves around individual uniqueness at the same time that there is a need to belong." Erikson (1980) called this the stage of "identity versus identity diffusion" (p. 94). More recently, others have referred to this period as "identity versus role confusion" (Crain, 2011, p. 291). For many, the "defence against a sense of identity confusion" is to become a part of a clique or group, which may behave in cruel ways to the point of excluding others who are "different", based on skin colour, cultural background, dress, taste or other conditions (Erikson, 1980, p. 97).

Adolescence brings with it deeper and more abstract thinking, and adolescent adoptees are better able to understand the meaning and purpose of adoption, including the notion of legal permanence, and the implications of being adopted (Brodzinsky, 2011, p. 5). In addition, adolescents may also be acutely aware of the perceptions of others who may view adoption as a "second best" option after biological attempts to form a family fail (Brodzinsky, p. 6). Brodzinsky refers to this as "status loss" by virtue of being adopted (p. 7). This can cause adolescent adoptees to question their value to their adoptive family and to worry about what their peers think of them.

> My friends say it's cool that I'm adopted … you know, having two sets of parents … two mums and two dads … but I also know that they're glad that they're not adopted and that makes me feel a little uncomfortable … it feels like they're saying one thing, that adoption is cool, but really thinking that it's not … that they're glad it didn't happen to them … that makes me think that they feel sorry for me … I hate that. (16-year-old boy, adopted from Colombia at 18 months, cited in Brodzinsky, p. 6)

Adolescents typically go through a process of determining who they are and where they belong (Grotevant, 1997). For adoptees, identity formation has an additional complication, as it requires the individual to find ways to integrate aspects

of two families and, in the case of ICA, two cultures into their identities (Brodzinsky, 2011) (see also discussion on race, racism and cultural identity in chapter 2). Reactions to grief which often start in middle childhood may be minimal for some, but can be "nearly constant and profoundly felt" by others (Brodzinsky, p. 7). Teachers of adolescent adoptees need to be aware of their own feelings about adoption so as not to project any negative views when issues arise in class. Schoettle (2003) advises teachers who feel uncomfortable or ill-prepared to lead discussions about adoption to consult with the school counsellor and parents to determine a way forward which will best support the child.

Criticisms of Erikson's theories

Generally, Erikson's theories have been supported by research (Steinberg & Morris, 2001) and advanced by others within specific fields (for example, Bowlby, 2008; Cross, 1971, 1978; Helms, 1990, 1994; Marcia, 1980, 1987). However, there are some pronounced rejections of his theories. Feminist perspectives, for example, criticise Erikson, arguing that his conclusions are vague and subjective, based on his personal experiences as opposed to using controlled methods and valid empirical evidence (Snowman et al., 2011; Sorell & Montgomery, 2001). Gilligan (1979, 1982, 1988) and Sorell and Montgomery (2001) purport that Erikson's theories also reflect white, middle class, male experiences and developmental norms and do not identify with typical female development. They cite the different focus on relationships and achievements and differing rates of addressing identity and intimacy that exist in males and females (Gilligan, 1982; Sorell & Montgomery, 2001).

With specific reference to adoptees, modifications to developmental theory have been advocated. Studies which have identified severe developmental delays as a result of institutionalisation and the impact of learning a second language (Gindis, 2005, 2008; Glennen, 2002) also highlight that some of these children do not develop according to the typical milestones described by stage theories of development. Further criticism is directed against the failure to consider the social construction of the adoptees' experience (Miall, 1996; Wegar, 2000; Zamostny et al., 2003). While some research includes findings that most adoptees fall "well within the normal range of functioning" (Brodzinsky et al., 1998, p. 45), deficit models which only focus on the behaviour patterns and attitudes of the "stigmatized individual" (Wegar, p. 364) fail to consider the impact of social context, including the role of adoptive

parents, friends/peers and teachers. According to Wegar, over "pathologizing" the adoption experience has cultivated a "major theoretical barrier" (p. 365) to understanding this unique experience in the current political, cultural and social climate.

This thesis supports the need for an integrated theory which considers both the developmental and the sociocultural factors which influence the adoptee's experience in school. While adoption researchers have applied psychodynamic theories to the context of adoption, they do not adequately frame questions about the impact of parents', children's (or teachers') attitudes and beliefs about culture and race in relation to the adoptee's experience, or about the impact of adoption on the social experiences of these children at school. Furthermore, early childhood research which espouses a growing dissatisfaction with predominately normative developmental-constructivist theoretical approaches has led to a shift towards sociocultural discourse (Edwards, 2007). Therefore, the thesis also draws on social constructionist theory, to help "tease out the intricacies and ambiguities of the adoption experience" within the school context in current times (Gray, 2009, p. 29).

3.4.3 Social constructionism

The previous discussion of childhood development from the early years of school through to adolescence highlights the significance of children's social construction of reality on their personal development and well-being. Prior experience; language development; discourse in relation to family and personal histories; identity formation and sense of belonging, all reflect the subjective and intersubjective experiences of internationally adopted children in the context of school.

Social constructionism is a theoretical paradigm which is "multidisciplinary in nature", evolving from the "unhelpful separation of sociology and psychology" (Burr, 2015, p.2). It is influenced by a number of disciplines such as sociology, linguistics and philosophy and maintains that human biological development is influenced by the natural environment as well as by the "specific cultural and social order" to which humans are exposed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 66). This is significant when considering the role that school personnel and family play in promoting attachment, resilience and socialisation of children from trauma backgrounds.

A social constructionist paradigm proposes that all experience is historically, socially and culturally constructed and that individuals' perspectives on their experience form the basis of their reality within a specific social context (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Cromby and Nightingale (1999, p. 5) suggest: "We actively seek to explore aspects of our world, in particular ways for particular purposes, and in so doing create knowledge which we then take as the 'truth' about the world". Social constructionist theory provides a framework for analysing the intersubjective and the subjective nature of reality in schools and between schools and families, and the way in which reality is constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Social constructionism acknowledges early sociological perspectives that all knowledge is derived from a particular standpoint (Mannheim, 1936) and that social processes involved in everyday interactions result in a shared understanding and interpretation of knowledge across different social contexts. The "truths" articulated by the participants in this study and the extent to which knowledge was shared or mutually understood by "actors" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) was "contingent upon human practices" (Crotty, 2012, p. 42) that varied between families and schools. While the nature of reality involves individuals' subjective truths, it "does not require additional verification over and above its simple presence" and any doubts about the authenticity or validity of perceptions should be suspended (Berger & Luckmann, p. 37). Indeed, it is the researcher's "moral obligation" to acknowledge individuals' unique constructions of reality and to "honour the actor's truth as real" (Puig, Koro-Ljungberg, Echevarria-Doan, 2016, p. 141).

Language is a powerful tool which gives order and meaning to everyday life through vocabulary and conversation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2015) and intersubjectivity (empathy and understanding) between the researcher and participants was a "pre-condition for interaction" (Duranti, 2010, p. 9). Face-to-face interactions maximised opportunities to comprehend participants' collective and individual realities, and meaning often became "massive and compelling" (Berger & Luckmann, p. 43). The methods used in this study fostered meaningful dialogue "within the context of ongoing relationships" (Gergen, 1994, p. 49).

This literature review has identified the school community as one of the first social contexts to impact significantly on adoptees' sense of self-worth and on the construction of their cultural, racial and ethnic identity. Social constructionism

implies that the "significant symbols" of schools (knowledge, language, gestures, activities, policies and practices) all have the potential to "impose meaning" (Geertz, 1973, p. 45) on the experiences of children at school. Furthermore, the "habitualisation" of frequently occurring policies and practices which are commonly used to maintain social and institutional order (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 70) have the potential to significantly influence the experiences of children and their families. For example, transitions and socialisation processes; school/home communication policies; practices that maintain behavioural expectations, all serve to reinforce order in schools irrespective of circumstance. Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 80) argue:

> Institutions must and do claim authority over the individual, independently of the subjective meanings he may attach to any particular situation. The priority of the institutional definitions of situations must be consistently maintained over individual temptations at redefinition. The children must be 'taught to behave' and, once taught, must be 'kept in line'. So, of course, must the adults. The more conduct is institutionalized, the more predictable and thus the more controlled it becomes.

Social Constructionism invites a critical stance on knowledge which is taken for granted (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1985, 1994, 2009) and knowledge, once acquired, invites social action (Burr, 1995). The interviews with parents and conversations/drawings with children were designed to achieve the intended purpose of accessing particular perspectives on the children's lived experience in order to raise awareness and to identify ongoing mechanisms for maximising positive school experiences for intercountry adoptees at school. This required an understanding of the participants' perspectives on certain institutionalised practices in the participants' schools.

For teachers, the cultural lens through which they view the children's experience and the practice of ICA may lead them to determine their own interpretations of the phenomenon, while also leading them to ignore other relevant meanings (Crotty, 2012). Furthermore, as Gergen (2009) explains, "all truth claims are specific to particular traditions – lodged in culture and history" (p. 8). If this is so, teachers' truths or beliefs may be influenced by the culture and history of ICA in

Australia, the messages depicted in the media, and their own experiences of adoption, race and culture.

Race is a social construction which often varies across cultures, and in some cases, a strong connection exists between race and social class (Banks & Banks, 2010). For example, the perspectives of a Caucasian South African-born teacher towards a black-skinned African child adopted by a "white" family may be influenced by the political, social and economic characteristics which exist in their country of origin. Similarly, adoptive parents' beliefs may be influenced by racial and cultural encounters in their child's birth country or at home, by their personal experience of schools, and by the degree to which they engage with adoption research and cultural communities.

Constructionist dialogue provides an opportunity for teachers to reflect critically on past assumptions and practices, to "suspend the obvious" and to "construct new forms of understanding" through "collaborative participation" (Gergen, 2009, pp. 12, 28) with families and other relevant groups. Indeed, teachers are invited to become "agents of change", through their contribution to discussion and understanding of inclusive practices for all children "through the critical scrutiny of language, discourse and meanings" (Ballard, 2012, p. 79). When teachers teach with diversity in mind, they recognise that they may not understand "the experiences, beliefs and preferences" which may be the basis of unjust or exclusionary classroom practices (Ballard, p. 75).

School children living with their biological families are born into a world of different meanings (about family, culture, race, belonging, identity) from those children who do not live with biological families or who joined their families through overseas adoption. Children who were not adopted learn about the meaning of adoption "from the culture in which [they] are reared" (Crotty, 2012, p. 57), and research shows that children still "come to school with many negative attitudes toward and misconceptions about different racial and ethnic groups" (Banks & Banks, 2010, p. 21). Teachers as change agents have the opportunity to foster understanding and reduce prejudice about cultural and family diversity through lessons and activities which promote "positive interracial attitudes and actions" (Banks & Banks, p. 21) and adoptive parents and post-adoption support services may be able to support them with this. A shared knowledge and understanding about the

potential impact of trauma and loss on children, about issues unique to adoptees (such as family difference or the effect of "language switch") or shared with other minority groups (such as racism and discrimination), will ensure better support and understanding for this population at school. Appropriate curriculum and classroom practices will provide opportunities for intercountry adoptees to "reinvent and redefine themselves" (Gray, 2009, p. 217) through ongoing negotiations with one another, with their families, their teachers and with the broader school community.

3.5 CONTRIBUTION OF EACH THEORY TO THIS STUDY

The integrated theoretical framework comprising attachment, trauma, childhood development and social constructionist theories provides a strong foundation from which to consider the first research question: "What are the primary school experiences of intercountry adoptees, from the perspectives of adoptive parents and children?"

Attachment, trauma and childhood development theories combine to answer the second research question: "How do the early life experiences of intercountry adoptees impact on their school experience?" This discussion will encompass known information, shared by parents and adoption and support workers, about the children's pre-adoption experience, and the impact this has on their attachment needs and transitions to school. It will also consider the perspectives of the children at different ages/stages of schooling.

A social constructionist perspective invites a reflective and critical approach to examining the experiences of intercountry adoptees in the social context of the school. This study will incorporate the analysis and interpretation of key themes in relation to the selection of the education system and school; the teacher; and academic, behavioural, communication, social/emotional and racial/cultural experiences at school. It will take a critical stance on knowledge and action which is culturally and historically constructed in schools and will aim to increase understanding about institutionalised practices which help or hinder the children in different school contexts. Thus the research invites social action and collaboration as a result of a shared understanding of the needs and experiences of this group of children in school.

3.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

An integrated theoretical analysis of the experiences of the intercountry adoptees in this study provides a holistic view of the issues which may impact on the children at school. Every effort has been made however, not to essentialise the lives of the children or their families. As MacArthur, Higgins and Quinlivan (2012) suggest, marginalised students may experience exclusion "because their lives have been theorised as deficient through positivist research paradigms" (p. 239). This study acknowledges that many adoptees adjust well to their new families and do well at school. It also acknowledges the ongoing challenges and need for understanding and support that some children have as a result of early life experience and trauma. Theories of attachment, trauma, childhood development and social constructionism combine to offer poignant insights into the key issues facing intercountry adoptees in schools today.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a description of and a rationale for the methodological design of the research project. A qualitative methodology using a multicase study approach addressed questions concerning the school experiences of children adopted internationally by Australian families. The study had two phases. In phase one, focus group interviews with adoption and support workers (one group) and adoptive parents (three groups) were conducted to explore, but not limit, the identification of key issues for subsequent categorisation and in-depth investigation. The identified categories provided a starting point for phase two: an in-depth investigation into the experiences of 10 Australian families in Queensland. In this phase, semi-structured interviews were used with parents of primary school-age children to further investigate all categories; however, those that were more relevant or significant to individual families were given more attention in each case. Documentary evidence was collected where appropriate to support interview data. Children's perspectives were gleaned using their drawings on a range of topics which stimulated conversations about their school experiences, and accompanying written text aided the analysis of these experiences in some instances.

Theorising the adoption experience is a complex task, particularly when considering the natural development of children in relation to their pre-and post-adoption experience, the social context of schools, and dimensions of culture and race. Crotty (2012) argues that in contemporary research, both constructivist and constructionist paradigms may interact where "the social world and the natural world" exist simultaneously (p. 57). For the intercountry adoptee, the nature of reality may be informed both by their individual construction of meaning about their own adoption experience and by the "collective generation of meaning as shaped by the conventions of language and other social processes" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 127). For adoptive parents and teachers, their "truths" about the intercountry adoptee's experience of school may in fact be historical, cultural and social interpretations which "arise in and out of interactive human community" (Crotty, 2012). This position is congruent with the social constructionist position that "we do not find or

discover knowledge so much as we construct or make it" (Schwandt, 2000, p. 197) and that constructionist dialogues "open vast potentials for co-creating the future" (Gergen, 2009, p. 31). This position is particularly relevant to the consideration of inclusive practices in schools which support children from minority or disadvantaged backgrounds.

4.2 CHAPTER ORGANISATION

This chapter has five sections. Section 1 outlines the Research Design, including the methodological approach, the rationale for the use of case study, the research objectives, and the guiding research questions and sub-questions. Section 2 details the process for the recruitment and selection of participants for phase one and phase two of the study and addresses issues of access and permission. Section 3 details the choice of data collection methods and instruments used. Section 4 addresses the data analysis and interpretation, including issues of validity. The chapter concludes with the ethical considerations for the research and a chapter summary.

4.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

4.3.1 Qualitative and interpretive

The literature review highlights the propensity for large scale quantitative studies to dominate adoption research. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011, p. 2) "the province of qualitative research is the world of lived experience, for this is where individual belief and action intersect with culture". Accordingly, the choice of a qualitative, interpretive methodological approach allows for the targeting of certain populations, and the use of creative ways to make meaning of the data, through "culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world" (Crotty, 2012, p. 67). Such an approach informs this study, which supports the notion that the school experiences of young children are diverse and are influenced by a range of factors, including pre-adoption experiences, their sense of belonging and personal identity, and parents' and educators' ability to work together within the social and cultural context of the school (see Chapter 2).

While large scale studies have been dominant, more recently, smaller qualitative studies have emerged, conducted by those directly impacted by adoption, adding a richer understanding of the phenomenon from varied and personal

perspectives. In Australia, Indigo Willing (2010), raised in a Vietnamese orphanage and adopted into a white Australian family, explored the challenges faced by 35 adoptive parents in raising children from a different racial and cultural background. Kim Gray (2009, p. 31), an adoptive mother of Korean-born children, described her integral role as a "major player" in her qualitative study which focused on 20 intercountry adolescent and adult adoptees, as they "redefine" their "hybrid identity" in a multi-cultural Australia. In Belgium, Katrien De Graeve (2012, p. 101) interviewed 55 Flemish parents who had adopted children from Ethiopia, to examine the "experiences and identity work of adoptive parents in relation to the migration of their children".

This study continues this contemporary approach which allows the voices of those directly impacted by the adoption process to be heard. While some studies have asked adult adoptees to reflect on their school experiences (Donalds, 2012), Willing et al. (2012) argue that little research has been conducted with younger children regarding their adoption experiences. While adult's perspectives have historically been prioritised over those of children, contemporary research highlights that when children are active participants in the research, they are more likely to enjoy the process and to "accurately report their own views and experiences" (Alderson, 2005, p. 30). While stringent ethical approval processes are required for conducting research with young children (Farrell, 2005), children's competence and agency has also been called into question (Alderson, 2005). Willing et al. (2012) suggest that the limited participation of children in adoption research could also be attributed to the lack of appropriate data collection tools for this age group.

Sarah Richards' (2012) research in the United Kingdom employs narrative and visual approaches to collecting data from younger children. Richards presents the narratives of nine adoptive families (12 English parents and their 11 Chinese-born children, aged 5-12 years) compiled from semi-structured interviews informed by the construction of children's journals. Visual tools (Twine, 2006) included children's stories, pictures, photographs and artefacts which aided in understanding the negotiated sense of family and cultural belonging experienced by both parents and children.

Building on this approach, this study seeks a better understanding of the experiences of adoptive parents and children by utilising a range of "interconnected

interpretive methods" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 12) based on mutual understanding and trust between researcher and participants. Thus, this interpretive design used four focus groups in phase one to identify key issues or themes (Krueger & Casey, 2000) which informed phase two, a multicase study (Stake, 2006) of 10 Australian families. Respecting children as "competent participants" through "contemporary participative methods and research design" also aligned with contemporary ethical understandings about conducting research with children (Alderson, 2005, p. 35). Talking, drawing, writing and audio-recording conversations further engaged children in developing a shared understanding of their experiences at school.

4.3.2 Why case study?

According to Simons (2009), case study has been defined and categorised in a number of different ways by a wide range of disciplines, and varies according to "philosophical, methodological and epistemological preferences" (p. 20). Broadly, Lincoln and Guba (1985) claim that case studies are valuable for aligning the "value positions of investigator, substantive theory, methodological paradigm, and local contextual values" (p. 42). Case study is most suited to "emic inquiry" or the reconstruction of participants' perspectives, and is effective in highlighting the continuous interplay between researcher and participant (p. 359) Similarly, Yin (2003) claims that case study is a "comprehensive research strategy" which incorporates specific data collection methods and approaches to analysis (p. 14). Stake (1995), however, argues that case study "is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (1995, p. xi) and "is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied", with interest focused on the individual case itself rather than "the methods of inquiry used" (Stake, 2008, p. 119). In light of this variation in views, this case study commits to understanding the complexity of a phenomenon within a "real life" context through a range of different data sources (Simons, 2009, p. 20).

This study adopts Stake's (2006) *multicase study* approach in which a phenomenon (the primary school experience of intercountry adoptees) is identified from the outset and a small number of accessible cases are used to explore and illuminate the phenomenon in depth. The combined individual cases become an

"integrated system", which Stake calls a "quintain" (p. 4), which documents the "typical" and the "unique" (p. 6), the "ordinary" and the "unusual" (p. 30), in order to understand the overall phenomenon.

Baxter and Jack (2008) warn that a common pitfall in case study research is the tendency to make the study too broad or to try to address too many objectives. To avoid this problem, Simons (2009, p. 29) recommends that the case study be defined within a "bounded system". Creswell (2012) suggests that the case may be limited according to "time, place, or some physical boundaries"(p. 465). This multicase study collected data from 10 individual families in Queensland owing to accessibility by the researcher. The "family" was limited to the children who were adopted from overseas (not other biological children within the family) and their parent or parents. The children were primary-school age in 2014, the year the majority of data collection took place. Stake (2006) argues that while case study "does not require priority on diversity of issues and contexts", most qualitative researchers pay careful attention to the diversity revealed by the study (p. 13)**.** The intention of this study was to provide maximal variation between cases in order to learn about the range of experiences (Creswell, 2012; Stake, 1995) these children have at school.

Since this study is described as an *instrumental* multicase study or a *collective* case study (Creswell, 2012; Stake, 1995, 2006), it is anticipated that intensive analysis of both the individual cases and the collective case will not only identify the school experiences of the children involved in the study, but may also provide insight into broader issues surrounding belief systems of parents, interpersonal relationships between teachers and parents, and developmental and identity issues for children. It is not suggested, however, that the individual cases will be typical of all adoptive families' experiences, as this would be "difficult to defend" with a small number of cases (Stake, 1995, p. 5). According to Simons (2009)**,** case study is useful as it "can document participant and stakeholder perspectives, engage them in the process, and represent different interests and values" (p. 18)**.**

Yin (2009, p. 15) explains that case study research should aim to "expand and generalise theories", not to represent a sample group or generalise to a population. Stake (1978) argues, however, that case studies are often selected as a preferred research method because "they may be epistemologically in harmony with the reader's experience and thus to that person a natural basis for generalization" (p. 5).

While it is not intended that the experiences of participants in this study should be generalized to the population of Australian adoptive families, narrative conventions will enable the reader to apply their "tacit knowledge" to vicariously relate (Simons, 2009, p. 23) to the participants' experiences. There is little doubt that some adoptive families will be able to relate to the experiences of those depicted in this study.

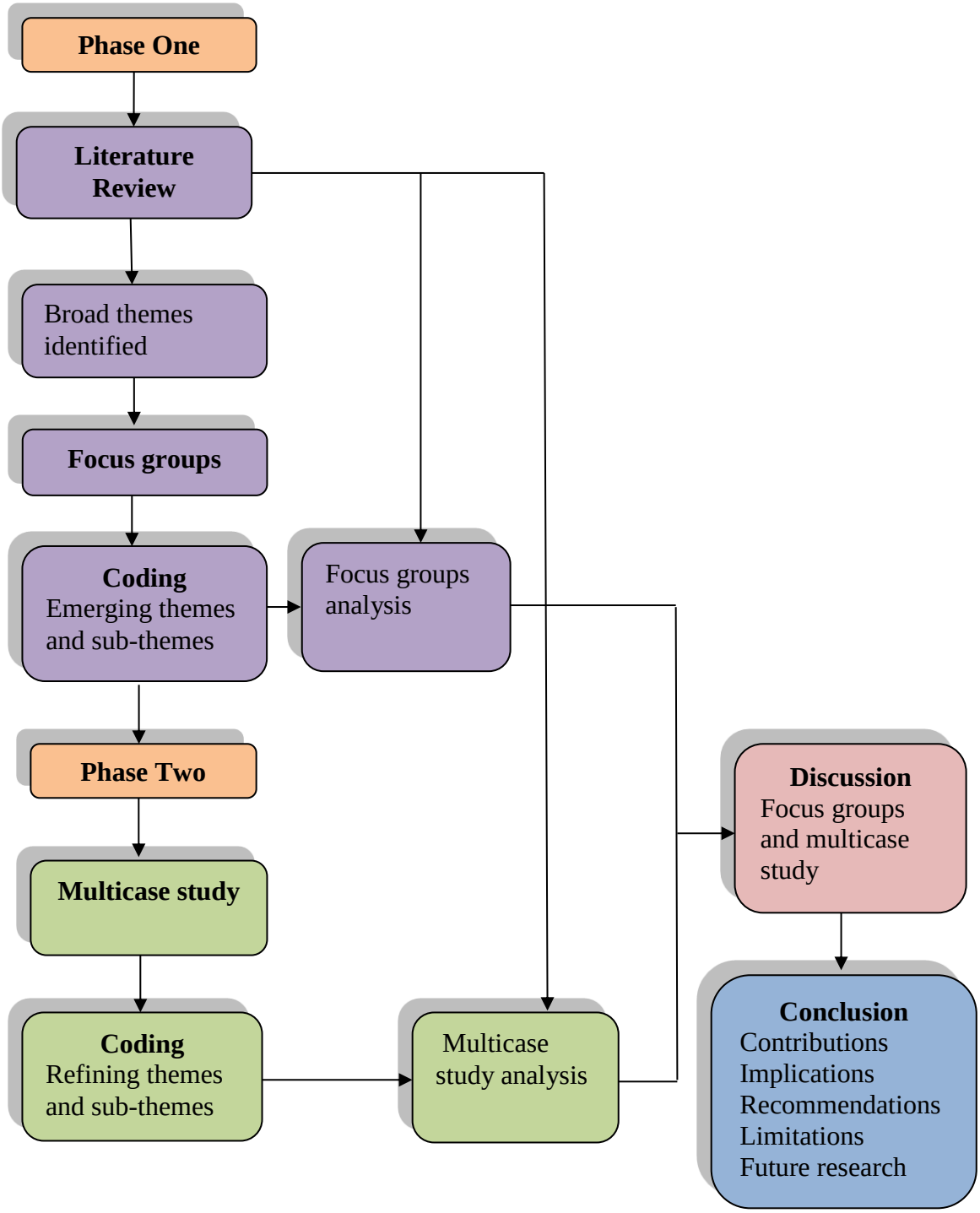


Figure 4.1. The multi-category research design (Creswell, 2012)

4.3.3 Project design

Figure 4.1 represents the multi-category design (Creswell, 2012) used to collect data in the two phases of the project. Broad themes from the literature informed questions asked in Phase one with four focus groups (Bloor et al., 2001; Krueger & Casey, 2000) of adoption and support workers (one group) and adoptive parents (three groups). This first phase oriented the research and saw key themes emerge. These themes subsequently informed the data collection within phase two, the multicase study (Stake, 2006) and themes and sub-themes were further refined and analysed. Both focus group and multicase study findings were synthesised and discussed in conjunction with the literature. The research concludes with the contributions made to the field, the implications, recommendations and limitations of the study, and future research imperatives.

4.3.4 Research objectives

The first objective of the research was to collect, interpret, compare and represent "personal experience stories" as depicted by adoptive parents and children. This provided a voice for these "seldom-heard individuals in educational research" (Creswell, 2012, pp. 504, 505). The second objective was to determine the extent to which this minority group in Australia represents the key issues outlined in the existing literature, predominantly from overseas, and to identify alternative issues pertaining to the Australian context. The third objective was to recommend mechanisms for the development of a collaborative framework (involving parents, children, education and other professionals) for supporting intercountry adoptees in primary school.

4.3.5 Research questions

The "emic" issues or "deeper questions" (Stake, 2006, p. 9) were "progressively focused" throughout the study (Stake, 1995, p. 48), in order to understand the unique experiences of the children through parents' and children's narratives. Stake (2006) explains that while a multicase study will have one or more overarching research questions, the individual case within the study may be "organised and studied separately around research questions of its own" in order to relate the overarching question to the "situationality of the individual cases" (p. 9). Broadly, this study commenced with two key questions:

1. What are the primary school experiences of intercountry adoptees, from the perspectives of adoptive parents and children?
2. How do the early life experiences of intercountry adoptees impact on their school experience?

4.4 RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

4.4.1 Phase one: focus groups

Krueger and Casey (2000) explain that the purpose of focus group interviews is to bring together people who have something in common (parents of primary school-age children who were adopted from overseas) in relation to the topic being discussed (school experiences). Bloor et al., (2001) explain that focus groups can be particularly useful in the early stages of a research project to "inform the development of the later stages of the study" (p. 9). This study aimed to gather qualitative data (a range of opinions) within a "permissive, nonthreatening environment" with the intent of promoting "self-disclosure" (Krueger & Casey, 2000, pp. 5, 7).

Four focus group interviews were conducted in Queensland in metropolitan and regional centres. One focus group consisted of seven adoption and support workers from government, non-profit and independent organisations which provided access to a broader range of experiences beyond families who are members of support groups. While not adoptive parents themselves, these workers were in constant professional contact with adoptive families and were thus able to offer insights from a somewhat detached yet still informed perspective, which provided a degree of balance to the input. This group convened during work hours in a central business office. Three focus groups consisting of 18 adoptive parents (n = 5, 8, 5 respectively) were conducted on separate Saturdays. Original registrations were 6, 9 and 7 (n = 22); however, various unforeseeable personal circumstances resulted in four last minute withdrawals. Parents had primary school-age children adopted from China, Taiwan, India, the Philippines and/or Africa. Parent focus groups convened at mutually- convenient times in private rooms in a university, a book store and a council library, as suggested by participants.

In total, 25 adults (23 female, 2 male) participated in the focus groups. Focus groups ranged in duration from 87 minutes to 156 minutes. The shortest interview

conducted was with adoption and support workers. This could be due to the fact that the interview was conducted in work time and needed to keep to schedule. Also, it could be that workers were less personally invested in the topic than parents who were discussing their own children. The longest time taken was by the group with the largest number (eight) of parents, when participants requested the discussion be allowed to continue in order to adequately share and discuss their and their children's many and varied experiences.

Consideration was given to the allocation of participants to groups, as Krueger and Casey (2000) advised that care needs to be taken when grouping people together who are friends or from close-knit communities as this "may inhibit disclosure on certain topics" (p. 11). Alternatively, it may lead to participants impulsively and even regrettably disclosing information previously unknown to the group. Similarly, there is no guarantee that all participants will respect the confidentiality of the group after the focus group was over (Bloor et al., 2001), as the inherent nature of support group membership is the sharing of experiences with others in the group. Bloor, et al. (2001) argue, however, that using "pre-existing or purpose-constructed" groups such as support or friendship groups may approximate "naturally occurring" (p. 22) interactions in which participants feel more at ease about disclosing private and potentially sensitive information. Therefore, careful consideration of these issues enabled suggestions to be made to participants about the most suitable group for them to join.

As an active member of both the International Adoptive Families of Queensland (IAFQ) and the Philippines Support Group of Queensland (PSGQ), my "insider status" enabled me to use purposive sampling methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to distribute recruitment notices and flyers via existing networks to which I have access. It was for this reason that phase one focus groups were conducted in both North and South East Queensland. However, it was also important to include parents from regional Queensland to ensure that conversations around access to support services and variations to school demographics and culture were captured. Electronic (closed group) mailing lists and facebook pages were utilised through IAFQ and AICAN support groups to distribute introductory emails, information flyers and consent forms (see Appendices C to F). These were also distributed at various other support group events (for example, the annual International Adoption

Day Festival) to facilitate the recruitment of parents. The Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services (DCCSDS), Intercountry Adoption Unit in Queensland, also distributed information packs to clients who were not necessarily support group members but who may have been interested in the study. An article was also placed in the IAFQ quarterly magazine, which members automatically received. The recruitment process consisted of two phases as outlined below.

Focus group 1 – adoption and support workers

The adoption and support workers in focus group one held various roles when working with adoptive families. Participants were selected by those in a position of authority within each organisation and independent counsellors who worked with adoptive families were invited via email. The majority of participants had experience in responding to queries and providing support or counselling to adoptive parents and children, sometimes in relation to school experiences. Two participants were involved in the management of adoption services and post-adoption counselling staff; another focused primarily on the assessment, education and preparation of prospective adoptive families through to post-placement support and supervision. Four participants were involved in various forms of post-adoption counselling and support including the delivery of training programs to various practitioners, as well as running therapeutic workshops and retreats to a variety of groups impacted by adoption. One counsellor ran a private practice. Another participant provided support to adoption workers at the policy level.

This group was able to identify school-related issues based on their own experiences of working with adoptive families or on the issues raised by families themselves in the course of their work with them. According to Krueger and Casey (2000), focus groups with different types of people assist in providing different perspectives. Interviewing this group separately from the parent groups also avoided "mixing people who may feel they have different levels of expertise or power related to the issue" (Krueger & Casey, p. 27). This focus group provided a starting point to orient the study and helped to identify emerging issues.

Focus groups 2-4 – adoptive parents

Expressions of interest were called for adoptive parents to participate in one of three focus groups. While it was anticipated that mostly homogeneous groups would

respond according to their children's country of origin, in fact this was not the case as each parent focus group consisted of two or three different country groups. Date, time and location of the focus group apparently influenced participation more than group membership. Focus groups consisted of five to eight participants; all were female with the exception of two males who participated in groups with their spouses. Participants were parents to between one and four children adopted from China, Taiwan, India, the Philippines and/or Africa. Collectively, they had 22 children currently attending public, private or independent primary schools. Another three children had begun their education in a school system but were now being home schooled.

A dilemma existed when bringing together adoptive families. Some were members of adoption support groups and as such were more accessible to me than other families. Capturing the experiences of those not in a support group was difficult as there is no database which separates adoptive families for data collection purposes (Chambers, personal communication, 2013). For this reason, a "snowball" approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used to extend the invitations beyond the support groups. Initial contact was made via the existing networks previously described. Adoptive parents who were members of support groups were invited to distribute recruitment notices further afield to adoptive families who were not current members, with the aim of inviting them to participate in one of the focus groups.

The study included only those adoptive parents with children who were currently in primary school. Parents were interviewed at a time when traditionally maximum involvement in their children's schooling occurred, including communication with teachers and other education professionals about their children's adoption experience and well-being. The literature review confirms that as children enter the social realm of primary school the implications of ICA become apparent (Fishman & Harrington, 2007; Meese, 2002). It was also the aim of this research to capture the voices of young children within the supportive environment of the family, as these are voices rarely heard in the research into their own experience (Willing et al., 2012).

4.4.2 Phase two: multicase study

Stake (2006) suggests that the optimal number of cases in a multicase study lies between four and 15 with 10 being a manageable number (p. 22). Therefore, this

study collected data from 10 family cases to allow for uniqueness within and interactivity between individual cases. While this study of children's school experiences did not occur in the school setting it was, nevertheless, important that the environment approximated a "natural setting" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 189). For this reason, case study interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants, with orientation to the study, some document collection and follow-up "member checking" occurring via email (Simons, 2009; Stake, 1995). Individual case studies utilised semi-structured in-depth interviews with adoptive parents, either individually or as couples. Parent interviews were followed by conversations and facilitated drawing episodes with individual or paired siblings of primary school age.

Criteria for selecting cases

Purposive sampling requires critical thinking about the "parameters of the population we are studying" (Silverman, 2013, p. 148). In this study, families were selected who had children in either or both the 6-9 or 10-13 year old age group, with a comparable representation in each. Participants were selected on the basis of providing "typical" as well as "maximum variation" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in the cases for study. Derived from the literature review and consistent with the goal of multicase study methodology (to investigate a range of experiences), pre-determined criteria for selection were i) age at adoption (ie younger/older children), ii) current age (lower/upper primary), iii) country of origin, and iv) variation in school experiences (see Figure 4.2). "Opportunistic" samples were the result of participants receiving the recruitment flyer via existing support group email networks (Creswell, 2012, p. 209). Also, during parent focus group interviews, four families were identified by the researcher as presenting diverse experiences for further investigation in phase two of the study. These families were invited privately, at a later date, to ensure their anonymity. "Snowball sampling" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) through DCCSDS yielded one case.

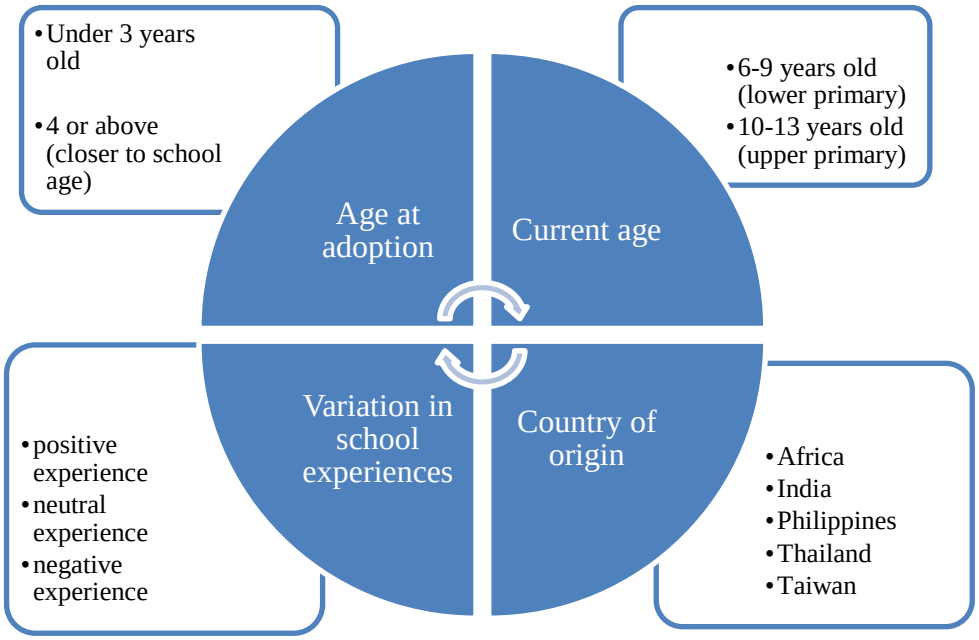


Figure 4.2. Criteria for selecting cases

In total, 10 family cases applied to participate in the study. All who applied were included as they met the selection criteria and together provided diversity within the multicase study (see Chapter 6, section 3.1).

4.4.3 Access and permissions

While efforts were made to invite families from outside adoption support groups, all participants were current or past members of a support group. Stake (1995) highlights, however, the importance of getting "acquainted with the people, the spaces, the schedules, and the problems of the case" to ensure a "quiet entry" into the case being studied (p. 59). During the 12 months leading up to the recruitment of participants, I shared my research proposal with adoption services staff, IAFQ committee members and families in various support groups on two cultural camps and at social gatherings. As much as possible, I also spent casual time with the children (on camps, international day, family picnics, W.I.S.E. Up workshops) to build rapport prior to talking with them in this study. Four of the 10 families who participated in the case study phase had heard about the proposed research project in advance and had varying degrees of communication with me prior to data collection.

Six families were unknown to me prior to the phase one focus groups and two families met me for the first time on the case study visit to their home.

As well as university approval processes, ethical approval was granted by the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services (DCCSDS) and the Benevolent Society (Post Adoption Support) for adoption and support services personnel to participate in the initial focus group. Ethical practices and protocols (for example, confidentiality, use of pseudonyms) were shared with all participants in the opening remarks of each focus group and case study interview. Participating parents were requested to explain the research project initially to the children to determine their willingness to participate. A "child-friendly" introductory letter, which used age-appropriate language and assumed a school-age level of competence in most cases (Alderson, 2005), was emailed to parents one week before scheduled interview times to assist them with this task (see Appendix L). In one case, where a child had cognitive and language difficulties, a phone call was also made to the parents to ensure that they had adequately explained the project to their daughter and that her consent to participate was given. A courtesy phone call the night before the interview ensured all parties were happy to participate in the study. Official permissions were sought from all parties, including the children, prior to commencing data collection on the scheduled date. All who indicated their desire to participate did so; there were no withdrawals from the study.

4.5 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

According to Simons (2009, p. 23), one of the advantages of case study is that "it can include a range of methods, whatever is most appropriate in understanding the case". My choice of data collection "tools" ensured "methodological triangulation" (Stake, 1995, p. 114), particularly between parents' perspectives of their children's school experiences and the children's own expression of their experience. Focus group interviews, case study interviews, document analysis (report cards, referral or specialist letters, class activity sheets), and conversations with children about their drawings on pre-determined topics further confirmed the data and added credibility to the analysis and interpretation of the data. An overview of the research process is outlined in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1

Research process overview

	Phase One - Literature Review and Focus Groups	Phase Two – Family Case Study
Rationale	• Initial exploration of intercountry adoptees' school experiences in the current Australian context • Exploration is guided by literature review • Gain initial information for RQ1 and RQ2	• Focus groups guide questioning route for multicase study (10 families who have adopted one or more children from overseas) • Provide information for RQ1and RQ2
Methods	• **Focus groups** • *Phenomenon:* Preliminary investigation into the primary school experiences of intercountry adoptees • *Primary units of analysis:* adoption and support workers (1 group); adoptive parents (3 groups)	• **Case study research** • *Phenomenon:* The primary school experiences of intercountry adoptees • *Case:* 10 families in Queensland; variety of backgrounds, school contexts and experiences • *Primary units of analysis*: parents and their children (adoptees only). • *Secondary units of analysis:* documentation provided by the parents; drawings completed by children; school web-sites
Research context	• Focus groups (n range = 5 to 8) ▪ Metropolitan and regional centres ▪ Conducted in convenient private rooms - work office, university, public library, book store) ▪ (June – July)	• Multicase study – 10 families ▪ Metropolitan and rural family homes ▪ One or two parents; one or two children in each family ▪ (September 2014– January 2015: Interviews/Conversations/Drawings) ▪ (September 2014 – April 2015: email follow-up, document collection)
Participants	• Adoption and support workers (n = 7) • Adoptive parents (n = 18)* • Parents represented 23 children from Africa, China, Philippines, Taiwan	• Adoptive families (n = 10) ▪ Parents (n = 15)* ▪ Children (n = 12) – from Africa, India, Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand NB* Six parents (5 families) in phase one also chose to participate in phase two
Data collection methods	• Focus groups ▪ Semi-structured interviews (approx. 90 – 160 minutes)	• Parent/s (1 or 2 per family) ▪ Semi-structured interview (approx. 60-90 minutes) ▪ Relevant documentation collected from parents (e.g. paediatric/psychological assessments, report cards, emails) • Children (individual or sibling pairs) ▪ Conversational interviews using broad topics in relation to adoption and school (30 – 60 minutes) ▪ Drawings with written text or oral recorded descriptions
Data analysis methods	• Thematic content analysis (qualitative)	• Descriptive context statements • Thematic content analysis and cross-case analysis (qualitative)

In addition, Stake (2006, p. 5) suggests that the construction of a "graphic design of the case study" provides greater visual clarity and enhances understanding. Such a visual tool highlights the features of the multicase study within the broader context of personal and systemic influences (see Appendix M). Work flow was managed and each case was built to incorporate a process which Stake (1995, p. 115) refers to as "member checking", where participants were invited to check the "accuracy and palatability" of case descriptions. Drafts were edited and amendments made where necessary.

4.5.1 Data collection instruments

Focus group interviews

Focus group interviews were conducted in order to "elicit views and opinions" in response to a number of unstructured, open-ended questions (Creswell, 2012, p. 190). Two versions of the interview schedule were created, one for adoption and support workers and one for parents (see Appendices G and H). There were only slight variations to ensure the questions were appropriate for the respective groups. Guiding questions were informed by the literature and designed to cumulatively address the research questions.

The approach to questioning followed the protocol recommended by Krueger and Casey (2000), beginning with opening and transition questions (Questions 1 and 2) aimed at relaxing and encouraging conversation from all participants. Key questions followed which provided a broad base from which to explore children's pre-adoption and social, emotional, behavioural and academic school experiences. Issues surrounding race, curriculum and communication with education professionals were also identified in the literature as significant and were therefore included as key questions. Closing questions enabled the opportunity to reflect on the most significant issues and to add final comments. Basic demographic data were also collected via a sign-in sheet completed by participants upon arrival for the focus group interview (see Appendices I and J). This was supplemented by responses to Question 1 which required participants to share about themselves and their role (focus group 1) or their children (focus groups 2-4). Subsequently, key themes and sub-themes emerged from the focus groups which guided the refinement of semi-structured questions and conversation topics to be used in Phase two: multicase study (see Chapter 6).

Silverman (2013, p. 208) argues that "interviews should always be recorded", but warns that transcription may be excessively time consuming and dominate the researcher's time at the expense of time spent on analysis. All focus group data were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher within one week of each interview. This ensured full immersion in the data with the added benefit of recent memory and familiarity with participants to support the transcription process.

Interviews with case study parents

According to Stake (1995, p. 64), "the interview is the main road to multiple realities" in a qualitative case study. As well as documenting different perspectives on a phenomenon, Simons (2009, p. 43) claims that in-depth interviewing is a flexible approach which allows the interviewer "to pursue emergent issues" and to "probe a topic or deepen a response". A parent interview schedule was developed (see Appendix K), and used as a guide to exploring individual cases. In addition to gathering background and school contextual information, questions explored further the key themes identified in the focus groups. Key themes were:

1. Impact of pre-adoption experience and age at adoption
2. School experience (positive, neutral, negative)
3. Communication
4. Transitions
5. Academic success
6. Social experiences
7. Emotional experiences
8. Behavioural experiences
9. Curriculum experiences
10. Racial/cultural experiences
11. Post-adoption/school support

Interview questions were designed to address the research questions. Question 1 also asked parents how they heard about the research and why they chose to participate in the study. The final question asked parents to identify the most important thing they would share with schools/teachers about their child/children's experiences of school. These questions provided greater understanding of the significance of the issues faced by these families.

Interviews often evolved into a more conversational style of communication (Simons, 2009) as a comfortable and equitable dialogue with parents was established. Deviations allowed the thorough exploration of the specific situational contexts of each family (Stake, 2006). Semi-structured interview questions were emailed to parents one week before the scheduled interview to allow time to consider their responses should they wish. The interview schedule consisted of two parts. Part A aimed to capture demographic data (including pre-adoption experiences and school context) in an expeditious fashion by giving parents the option of completing this section prior to the interview (Simons, 2009). However, in all cases, any brief notes made by parents in advance resulted in more extensive discussion in the interview. In particular, in cases where children were adopted closer to school age, the discussion about the impact of pre-adoption experiences on the children's school experience as well as language attrition and acquisition was more significant than in the cases where children were adopted at a younger age. The data highlighted the need for chapter six to include relevant background information which may otherwise remain "invisible" in a study of school experiences.

Stake (1995) and Simons (2009) both recommend that that an interviewer should not rely on transcripts of the audio-recorded interviews, but should be adept at listening, taking notes to help "keep track of the research process and evolving understanding"(Simons, p. 53), seeking clarification, reconstructing the account and providing a copy of the account to the participant for verification and suggestions for improvement. This advice was followed.

Talking and drawing with children

To "ease into" the family home and to help the children feel comfortable with me I allocated ample time to enable the family to have morning or afternoon tea (provided by me), or for the children to show me their room, their ipad, their pet or other interest prior to the interviews. In at least four cases, the children appeared more relaxed and happy to talk and draw with me after this period of "getting to know you". When the family's time was limited, this did not occur; however, it did not appear to impede the process in these cases.

Krueger and Casey (2000) explain that while self-disclosure often comes easily with very young children, "over time, the natural and spontaneous disclosures of children are modified by social pressure" (p. 8). Richards (2012, p. 106) considered

"best practice ideas on conducting research with children" to include young adoptees as participants in her research. Her interviews with children were "informed by their construction of a journal of stories and experiences, illustrated by pictures, photos and artefacts which the girls determine to be appropriate" (p. 106). Following this suggestion, I conducted semi-structured "conversations" with individuals and sibling groups (together or separately). This depended on parents' and children's preferences, and created an "opportunity for active dialogue" and "co-constructed meanings" (Simons, 2009, p. 44). Using drawings helped to decrease the "language barrier" experienced by children who were adopted closer to school age and who were continuing to acquire English as their daily language. Conversations with only one or two children at a time reduced the potential of "group think" which can occur with children in traditional focus groups (Yuen, 2004, pp. 461, 463). However, one sibling pair constantly checked what the other was drawing, while another pair "bounced off" each other while demonstrating a degree of sibling rivalry. In all paired conversations I placed siblings at either end of a large table or at two small separate tables and emphasised the importance of alternate, respectful talk to enable each child equitable opportunity to contribute.

The email sent to families one week before my visit included the semi-structured parent questions as well as the list of drawing/conversation topics for children. Children were asked to select 3-5 topics to draw and talk about with me a week later, thus giving them to think about what they would like to share and how they might share it. A phone call to parents prior to visiting confirmed the children's readiness and, in some cases, provided me with background information about the children's interests and hobbies. Photos of my family, especially the children in various school activities, were used as an icebreaker, in order to minimise the disparity in the position of power between myself and the children (Yuen, 2004).

Children were provided with A4 unlined paper to facilitate the scanning of their drawings onto computer (Bland, 2012), and a set of coloured felt pens each. Children were asked if they had pre-selected topics to draw and talk about in relation to their adoption experience in school. The 12 topics provided were:

1. Me, my family and school
2. I like school because …

3. I don't like school because …
4. Friends, other kids and adoption
5. Teachers and adoption
6. A happy or fun moment at school
7. An unhappy or sad/worrying moment at school
8. I like it when …
9. I don't like it when …
10. Things I think I do well in at school
11. Things I find hard to do at school
12. Own choice

Surprisingly, none of the children were confident about pre-selecting topics and required further conversation around what these topics may mean to them. Care was taken not to lead the children, but to start the conversation and follow their lead to topics that were most significant to them. Where children had no idea about what to talk about, I began simply with the question "Do you like school?" then "What do you like/dislike the most about school?" This invariably led to conversations around family and friends, subjects they liked or disliked, things they were good at or found difficult or a happy or sad moment at school (see chapter 6). Children were encouraged to add brief written text to their drawings and to orally describe them. Conversations included my seeking answers to "what", "how" and "why" questions about their drawings (choice of colour, size, style and positioning on the page) as well as "who" and "when" questions for greater understanding. When children expressed an aversion to drawing they were given the alternative of writing me a letter, telling me a story orally, or using an ipad with the child-friendly drawing application "Inkflow Plus". All children but one chose to draw using pen and paper first. Seven children used the ipad after tiring of using pen and paper. One said he didn't like to draw; however, when offered the ipad, he drew three drawings which enhanced the conversation significantly. Four children used the ipad at the end of our conversation, just for fun, and drawings were not on the research topics. For four children, using the ipad proved beneficial and encouraged them to draw between one and four additional drawings after they appeared to have finished with pen and paper.

All children who used the additional technology were confident in its use with minimal explanation needed.

In line with Bland's (2012, p. 4) observation that "the authenticity of visual analysis can be established through triangulation with material from a secondary source such as participant discussion or written text", all descriptions were audio-recorded for later transcription and analysis. This was an essential step in gaining accurate interpretations of the meaning and context of children's drawings and stories.

Documents

Documents provided a valuable secondary source of data to the interviews. Stake (1995, p. 68) explains "quite often, documents serve as substitutes for records of activity that the researcher could not observe directly". Supporting public and private documents (Creswell, 2012) were accessed in most cases to expand on, corroborate or provide examples of data acquired during the interview (see Chapter 6). In two cases, emails, letters, medical and school reports, and Individual Education Plans were emailed to me by the parents of their own volition, as advanced preparation for the interview. In two cases, parents provided documents (report cards, drawings) during the course of the interview. In the remaining cases, I negotiated with parents to email them with a list of required documents (referred to in the interview) following the transcription of the interview data. As well as private documents, public demographic data were accessed via school websites. All sites, however, have been de-identified and referenced only as "school website" with the date accessed.

4.5.2 Data analysis and interpretation

Simons (2009) distinguishes between the processes of analysis and interpretation of data. Analysis, she states, "is frequently a formal inductive process of breaking down data into segments or data sets which can then be categorized, ordered and examined for connections, patterns and propositions that seek to explain the data" (p. 117). On the other hand, interpretation is "the understanding and insight you derive from a more holistic, intuitive grasp of the data and the insights they reveal" (p. 117). Generally, however, qualitative researchers agree that these processes are both iterative and interpretive, and unlike quantitative research, are not

necessarily carried out in discrete sequential steps but may occur simultaneously (Creswell, 2012, 2014; Simons, 2009). This study used the data processing strategies of analytic induction and constant comparison first proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and further endorsed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as an approach which "makes explicit the continuous and simultaneous nature of data collection and processing" (p. 340).

In this study, the constant comparative approach enabled the evolution of themes and sub-themes throughout the two phases of data collection. This is illustrated in Appendix O. Themes arising from the literature informed the development of the open-ended questions directed to focus groups. Additional themes and sub-themes emerged from the focus groups which enabled further refinement of questions asked in the parent interviews. Consideration was given to the relationships and overlaps between themes. Regrouping of some sub-themes helped to streamline categories.

Creswell (2012, 2014) suggests that using a computer data analysis software program helps to organise, sort, store and search for text and image-based data more easily. He suggests that NVivo (QSR International) "offers a complete toolkit for rapid coding, thorough exploration, and rigorous management and analysis" as well as facilitating the creation of "text data matrixes" and "visual mapping" of thematic categories (Creswell, 2012, p. 243). Bazeley and Jackson (2013) concur, adding that using such a program "ensures a more complete set of data for interpretation than might occur when working manually" (p. 3).

Focus group and case study data were imported into two NVivo projects and each focus group and case was imported as a different source. "Units" of meaningful data guided the creation of nodes which were categorized according to the identified themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 348).

4.5.3 Within-case and cross-case analysis

According to Stake (2006), each case is "a complex entity located in its own situation" with its "special contexts or backgrounds" in particular, historical, cultural and physical contexts (p. 12). An understanding of the background experiences of adoptive families, in particular the pre-adoption experiences of the children, is essential to also understand "how the context influences the experience" (Stake, p.

39). Huberman and Miles (2002) stress the importance of the researcher becoming "intimately familiar with each case as a stand-alone entity" (p. 18). While all families in this study have experienced the ICA process, each experience of school is unique and is influenced by a number of factors.

Stake (2006), however, draws attention to a procedural and epistemological dilemma with multicase research. That is, to what degree is value to be placed on the unique characteristics of the individual case as opposed to the overall phenomenon (p. 4) and the emergence of common themes from the collective study? Huberman and Miles suggest that using strategies which identify similarities and differences between cases enables the researcher to "go beyond initial impressions" and to "capture the novel findings which may exist in the data" (2002, p. 19). Stake outlines a process for scaffolding the technical procedures for analysing and interpreting the "prominence, ordinariness, utility, and importance" of the findings of individual cases to the overall case (p. 72). These were used as a guide to structuring the cross-case data analysis using NVivo.

4.5.4 Validity

Simons (2009) argues that for research to be valid it must be "sound, defensible, coherent, well-grounded [and] appropriate to the case". Accordingly, the criteria of trustworthiness and credibility, as outlined below, were applied to this research.

Trustworthiness and credibility

Qualitative inquiry which aims to represent "multiple constructed realities" must "be credible to the constructors of the original multiple realities" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 295, 296). It is important to represent each participant's reality, through their stories, accurately, credibly and with sensitivity. However, there are potential ethical issues in gathering stories from individual perspectives. Creswell (2012, p. 512) highlights that participants may provide "fake data" (or distort the truth) as a result of self-reporting. They may fear reprisal after the findings are reported, or be unable to share their experience (due to the horror of an experience). They may simply be unable to recall all the facts.

Simons (2009, p. 131) highlights the importance of "respondent validation" to check the "accuracy, adequacy and fairness of observations, representations and

interpretations of experience with those whom they concern". Accordingly, I verified accounts with participants "negotiate[d] meanings" and checked the "accuracy and relevance of participant perspectives" (Simons, 2009, p. 127) with my supervisory team. Transcripts were emailed to participants or checked in person, and minor changes made in one case, where the written transcript appeared too personal and confronting to the interviewee. This was respected and changes were made.

It was also necessary to consider input from different interest groups and stakeholders (parents, children, adoption services personnel) as well as the needs of "consumers" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 374) of the final report and subsequent publications (parents, adoption services personnel, teachers, teacher educators). For example, parents (and children as they mature) who share their personal experiences will look for authenticity and outcomes from the research. Adoption services personnel will be seeking information to further support adoptive families. Teachers or teacher educators will be seeking enlightenment or ways to raise awareness in order to better cater for the diverse needs of children in schools. Therefore, it was important to check both data and analysis thoroughly with participants to ensure it was "accurate, credible, plausible and trustworthy" (Simons, 2009, p. 132) within the contexts and boundaries of my study.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasise the importance of building trust with participants, and Graham, Powell, Taylor, Anderson, and Fitzgerald (2013) affirm that "relationships are at the core of ethical research" (p. 13). Every effort was made through my involvement in adoption support groups and networks to build trust with prospective participants in this study. In the case of families who were not well-known to me prior to phase two, I negotiated ways of "spending time" or at the very least, communicating with them electronically or by telephone on several occasions prior to data collection. Throughout the process of working with families, I was also mindful of my responsibility to be reflexive in terms of giving a detailed account of my actions (Graham et al., 2013).

Complementary multiple methods of data collection (Denzin, 1970, 2009) also served to "verify the significance of issues through different methods and sources" (Simons, 2009, p. 130). For example, documentary evidence added support to parent interviews; drawings and written text supported children's explanations of their experiences. While parents and children's views were generally in accord, comparing

these perspectives occasionally highlighted multiple constructions of the same experience.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasise the need for maintaining an "audit trail" and Stake (2006) suggests that data, once collected, should be reviewed several times. For this reason constant critique of data management and analysis occurred with my supervision team throughout the reporting and analysis of data in order to confirm or challenge interpretations.

4.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethics approval for this study was sought and obtained from Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number: 1400000324) as well as the Director-General, Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services (Reference: COM03864-2014) and the Benevolent Society. Close attention was paid to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Health & Medical Research Council, 2007) and UNICEF's Office of Research guidelines on Ethical Research Involving Children (Graham et al., 2013).

4.6.1 Obtaining consent

Detailed information letters and invitations to participate were issued via existing networks (see Appendices D and E). This included the risks and time involved, and the voluntary nature of participation. Silverman (2013) emphasises the importance of gaining informed consent from all participants directly, including children, and this occurred prior to commencing data collection (see Appendix F). "Process consent", underpinned by the ability to withdraw consent at any stage, and a commitment to "debrief" participants (including the opportunity to comment on drafts) provided further reassurances to participants involved in the study (Barbour, 2007, p. 82; see also sections 4.6.2 and 4.6.3).

4.6.2 Working with children

This research fully supports the notion that researchers need to be "responsive to the varying developmental levels" of the children in the research and must engage with them "at their level in discussion about the research and its likely outcomes" (NHMRC, 2007, p. 55). It was conducted in alignment with Article 5 (regarding

parental guidance) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which includes:

> Helping children to understand their rights does not mean pushing them to make choices with consequences that they are too young to handle. Article 5 encourages parents to deal with rights issues in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child. The Convention does not take responsibility for children away from their parents and give more authority to governments. It does place on governments the responsibility to protect and assist families in fulfilling their essential role as nurturers of children. (UNICEF, 2014, p. 1)

The children in this study were young children (ages 6-9) and children of developing maturity (ages 10-13). As such it was important that I discussed with parents "the contexts of children's lives, their experiences and competencies" (Graham et al., 2013, p. 7) in order to determine their capacity and readiness to participate in this study. While this was important for all of the children, it was particularly relevant for those children who had joined their families from complex environments closer to school age, or who had not yet been in their families for an extended period of time. When parents expressed interest in their family participating in phase two of the research, the following safeguards were put in place in the best interests of the child/ren:

1. Parents were asked to explain the project initially to the child using the information sheets provided. If a child did not wish to participate (or if the parent did not wish them to do so) this was respected and no further request was made. One child in a sibling group chose not to participate. One child did not participate at the parent's request.
2. If a child expressed a willingness and desire to participate, I spent time with both the child and the parent/s explaining the research, the processes involved, and its likely outcomes, prior to collecting data. All 12 children expressed a willingness and desire to continue with the study.
3. When a child confirmed their willingness and desire to participate, I obtained formal permission from the child and the parent/s to proceed (Silverman, 2013, pp. 162-163).

The children's participation was justifiable, in that it was "vital in ensuring their right to participate in matters that affect them" and to "enhance the value and validity of findings" (Graham et al., 2013, p. 13). This approach is also supported by the UNCRC, Article 12, which not only refers to respect for the views of children, but also "recognizes that the level of a child's participation in decisions must be appropriate to the child's level of maturity" (Unicef, 2014, p. 1).

Children were not excluded from the research on the grounds of "competence, dependence and vulnerability", but careful consideration was given to "how their participation takes place" (p. 14). Working with the 10 families, especially the children, in the comfort of their homes and with the support of their parents nearby, endeavoured to cater for the child's safety, wellbeing and emotional and psychological security. The choice of collecting drawings and having conversations with the children was considered age appropriate as opposed to a more formal interview. A "child-friendly" explanation sheet was developed to help parents explain the study to their children (see Appendix H). A week prior to my visit to a family and data collection, explanation sheet, questions and conversation topics were emailed to parents for their consideration. Children and parents were made aware that they could withdraw from the research at any time, and were given multiple opportunities to review drafts and add further comments or documents or to make deletions during the data collection and analysis stages. In addition, the following risks were assessed and preventative measures applied.

4.6.3 Discomfort

Talking with parents about their children's school experience may trigger a range of emotions (for example, pride, ambivalence, sadness, frustration, even anger), which occurred on more than one occasion. Some children were shy, especially at first, when talking to me, an adult other than their parents, about their experiences. However, none seemed embarrassed or reluctant to talk and all "warmed up" quickly as I largely allowed them to lead the conversations.

The risk of discomfort was minimised through previous and ongoing rapport developed between myself and participants at adoption community events (camps, picnics, festivals) and by spending time with some families during holiday periods. Five families had previously completed the W.I.S.E. Up! program and all families were current or past members of an adoption support group. Both of these provided

the opportunity to talk and share with others about their adoption experiences. As previously discussed, "ice breakers" also assisted the children to feel comfortable talking to me. Full disclosure of the research project (approach, questions, drawing/writing tasks) was made prior to starting data collection.

4.6.4 Researcher's "insider" status

Following on from the preface to this thesis and the discussion of my "insider/outsider" status (see Chapter 1, section 1.7) I am known to many families in the adoption community through my involvement in support group activities over a number of years. Several families are considered good friends with whom my family spends more regular social time. While being an "insider" has its advantages, there was also the risk that parents might feel obligated to participate in the study. Silverman (2013) warns that participation must be voluntary and "free from any coercion" (p. 162). The voluntary nature of the project was explained through the IAFQ quarterly magazine, via group email lists and in person. Incentives for participation were not advertised. While I knew of families who might make a significant contribution to this study, some chose not to participate and no pressure was placed on them to do so.

4.6.5 Inconvenience

Participation in focus groups and/or interviews required participants to give their time, either in work hours or on weekends for travel. To minimise inconvenience, focus group one was conducted in an office at or near the work site for all adoption and support workers. Parent focus groups were conducted in private rooms (library, book store, university) in locations spread across northern and southern suburbs in South East Queensland and in one North Queensland centre. Parents indicated that this was the preferred option and it gave participants a choice of venue and location that was most accessible to them. Case study data were collected in the privacy and comfort of individual family homes. I travelled to an adoption camp to conduct the final parent interview as this was convenient for the family who lived some distance away.

4.6.6 Confidentiality and anonymity

It was anticipated that some parents may be concerned about maintaining confidentiality, in particular, following their participation in a focus group.

Therefore, I made a request at the commencement of each focus group discussion for comments to stay within the focus group. While this could not be guaranteed (Bloor et al., 2001; Krueger & Casey, 2000), all parents agreed.

Participants were informed, prior to data collection, that they may decline answering any of the research questions, or may disclose only information that they are comfortable disclosing. They were advised that pseudonyms would be used in the analysis and reporting of findings. Drafts of family cases were emailed to parent participants for "member checking" (Stake, 2006) and parents were advised that feedback could include a request to change or withdraw comments or issues, that on reflection, they deemed too sensitive or private to include. Supervisory team reviews were carried out throughout the drafting and analysis stages. Voice recordings and transcripts were securely stored and will be kept for a period of five years following the end of the research, and then destroyed.

4.6.7 Disclosure

At times parents and children revealed the names of their schools, teachers and other children. No identifying information was reported. Pseudonyms are used and locations are not linked to specific cases or responses. Where school websites were accessed to confirm current demographic data, these were referenced in general terms only.

4.6.8 Managing the risks

Mechanisms were in place to deal with any harm or discomfort that may occur. In the event that participants expressed a need for post-adoption counselling services, the Benevolent Society (PASQ) was prepared to provide this. This service was available free of charge. Only one participant requested the contact details for PASQ in relation to school issues and this was provided.

4.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter outlined the research design for this examination of the school experiences of children who were adopted from overseas, as told by adoptive parents and the children themselves. The qualitative and interpretive approach using case study methodology was defended as a means of investigating the diverse experiences of the families in this study. The phases of the research inquiry were then outlined,

together with the method of recruiting and the criteria for selecting participants. Methods of data collection and the constant comparison analytic approach were described within and across cases. Issues of validity, specifically trustworthiness and credibility, were then discussed. The ethical considerations for the research design, in particular, ethical ways of working with young children, were outlined in some detail. Finally, the limitations of the research design were discussed and some recommendations for future research outlined.

Chapter 5: Focus Groups

5.1 INTRODUCTION AND CHAPTER ORGANISATION

This chapter is the first of two data and analysis chapters that report on the two phases of the field research. Chapter 5 reports on the data and key findings from Phase One, which explored the perspectives of adoptive parents (and adoption workers and support staff), in relation to the primary school experiences of internationally adopted children. This chapter is structured around the 12 themes and 33 sub-themes which emerged from the focus group data. It has two sections. The first section provides graphic and tabular information in figures 5.1 to 5.3 necessary to understand the composition of the focus groups, the method of coding and identifying participants' contributions, and the process for developing and ranking themes and sub-themes. The second section reports on and analyses the data. It concludes with a summary of key findings which begin to answer the research questions.

5.2 COMPOSITION OF THE FOCUS GROUPS

The seven adoption and support workers in focus group one maintained a range of roles which directly or indirectly supported adoptive families (see figure 5.1). Eighteen adoptive parents (16 mothers, two fathers) residing in Queensland, Australia, collectively represented 23 internationally adopted children. Their children's countries of origin were Africa, China, the Philippines and Taiwan (see figure 5.2), with the children being spread across all primary grades from the preparatory year to grade seven (see figure 5.3). This diversity provides a suitable platform for generating the questions to be used in the case study interviews (see Chapter 6).

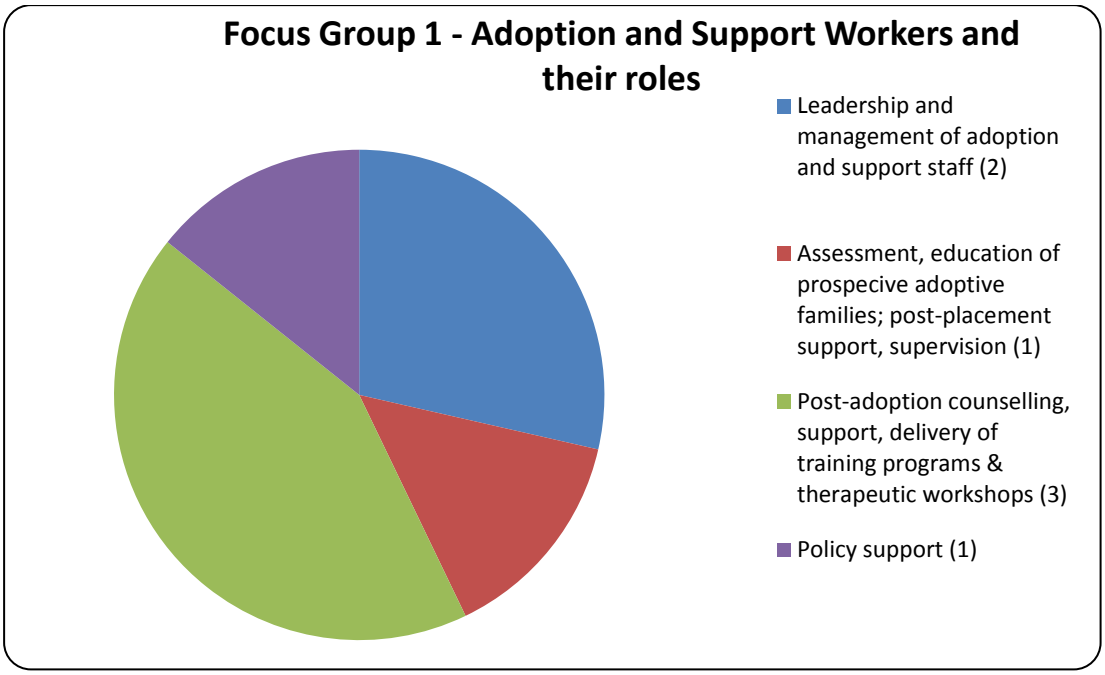


Figure 5.1. Adoption and support workers (n=7)

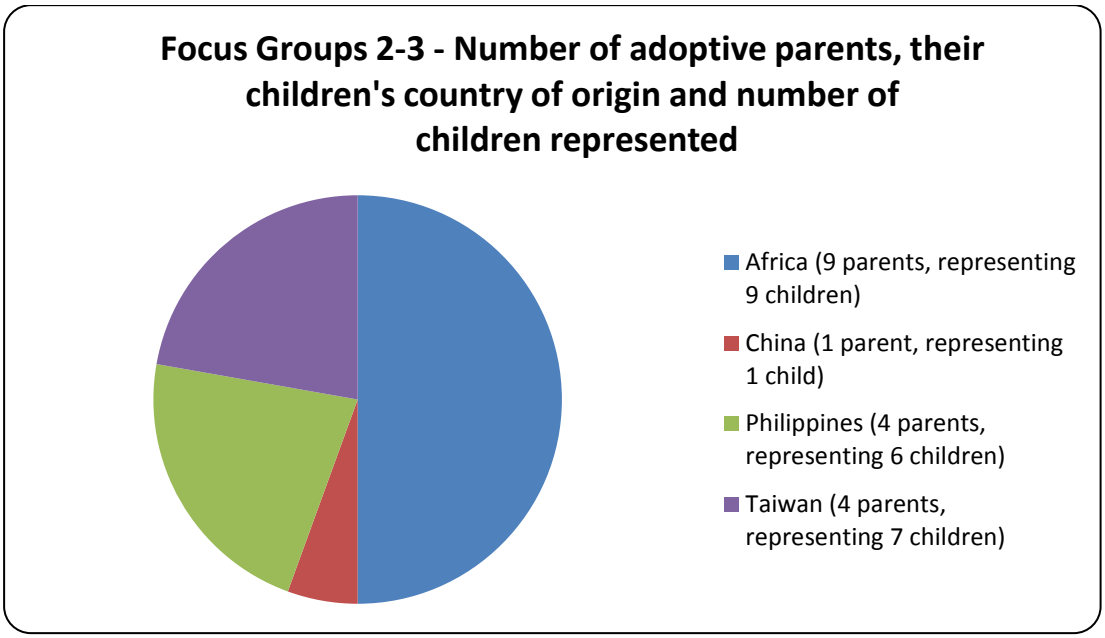


Figure 5.2. Number of adoptive parents (n=18), their children's country of origin and number of children represented (n=23).

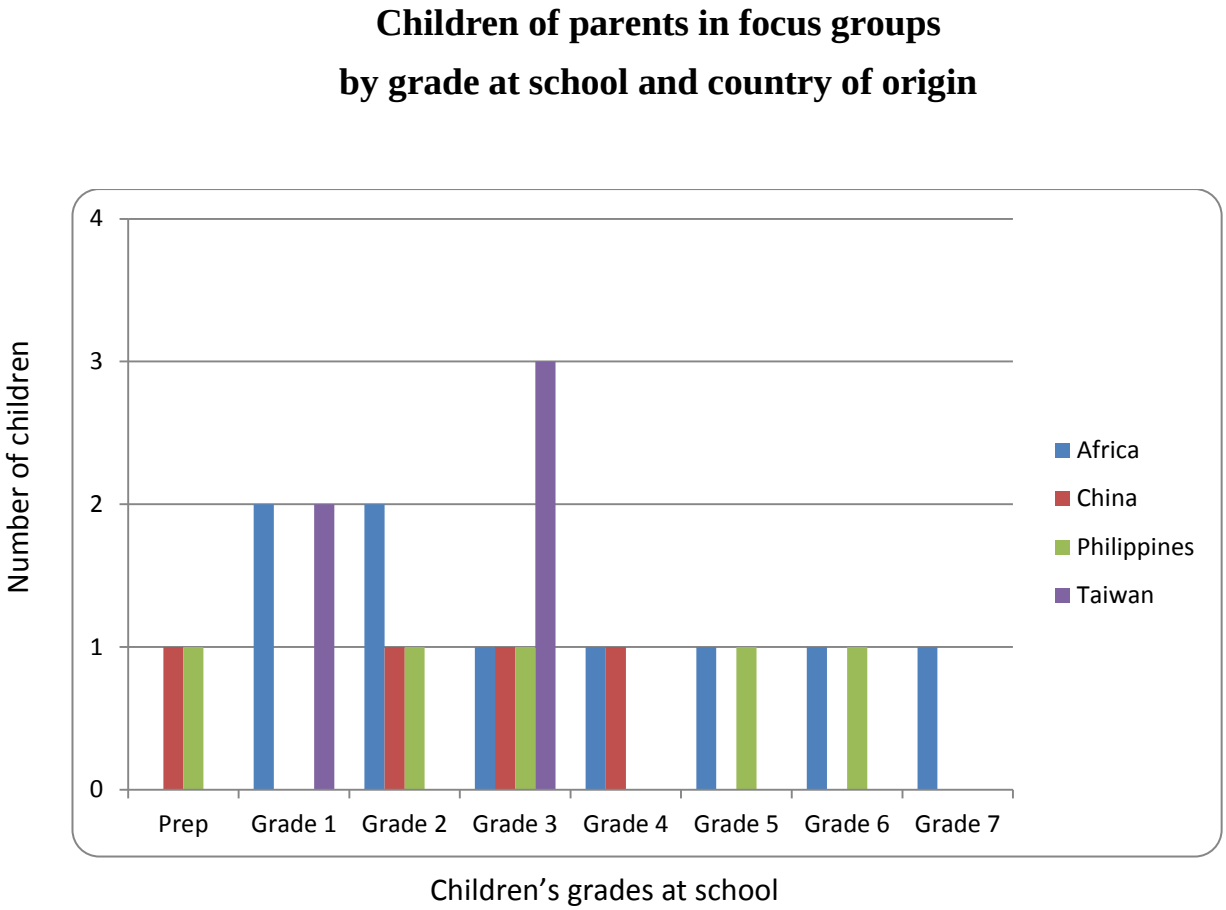


Figure 5.3. Children represented by parents in the focus groups according to their grade at school and country of origin

Focus group participants were assigned an alpha-numerical code and a pseudonym for ease of reference and to safeguard anonymity, as in Table 5.1. Participant codes are used in Appendix P for brevity while identifiers (pseudonyms) as well as participant codes are used in section two, the analysis and interpretation of the data.

Table 5.1

Focus group participant number, Number in group, Code and Identifier (Pseudonym)

Focus group number (Number in group)	Participant code	Identifier (Pseudonym)
1 (7)	FG1_ASW1[15]	Terri[16]
	FG1_ASW2	Emily
	FG1_ASW3	Jennifer
	FG1_ASW4	Anita
	FG1_ASW5	Leanne
	FG1_ASW6	Julie
	FG1_ASW7	Amanda
2 (5)	FG2_P1[17]	Sharon
	FG2_P2	Robyn
	FG2_P3	Jenna
	FG2_P4	Katrina
	FG2_P5	Judy
3 (8)	FG3_P1	Nerida
	FG3_P2	Samantha
	FG3_P3	Joanne
	FG3_P4	Renee
	FG3_P5	Monica
	FG3_P6	Penny
	FG3_P7	Carter
	FG3_P8	Kerry
4 (5)	FG4_P1	Caitlyn
	FG4_P2	Leonie
	FG4_P3	Margaret
	FG4_P4	Debbie
	FG4_P5	Brett
N = 25		

[15] Focus group 1_Adoption and support worker_1
[16] Identifiers (pseudonyms) and participant codes are used for in-text referencing
[17] Focus group 2_Parent_1

5.3 DEVELOPMENT OF THEMES AND SUB-THEMES

Recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher within one week of the data collection. Transcripts were uploaded to NVivo 10 (QSR International, 1999-2014) and deconstructed to identify the key experiences raised by participants' responses to the interview questions. Based on the literature review and identified key experiences, themes and sub-themes were established. Themes were ranked according to the frequency of their reference across the four focus groups (Appendix N). Of interest was the degree of activity which occurred across the focus groups on individual themes; however, the frequency of reference to particular themes was not used to assign greater or lesser importance, as that would mean the subjective comparison of participants' comments. The constant comparison of data, however, facilitated the further refinement of original themes and sub-themes (see Appendix O) as the data were more closely examined. Each theme and sub-theme is described briefly and illustrated with selected quotations from the focus group interviews in Appendix P. This may also be a useful guide throughout the reading of this chapter.

5.4 ANALYSIS OF DATA

This thesis seeks to determine the school experiences of children adopted from overseas countries through the analysis of participants' responses to key questions. To establish the nature of children's school experiences from the perspective of their supporting adults, questioning began by asking adoptive parents: "All things considered, would you say that your child has had positive, neutral, or negative experiences at school as a result of their adoptive status?" Similarly, adoption and support workers were asked: "In most cases, are you generally contacted by parents about their children's positive, neutral or negative experiences of school?"

5.4.1 Theme 1: Type of school experience

Three of five parents in the focus group held in North Queensland expressed the view that their children had, overall, very positive experiences of school. However, five of seven adoption and support workers agreed that generally parents make contact when they are experiencing a negative situation (or the non-existence of positive outcomes) in school and are seeking support. Five parent participants felt strongly that their children had recently, or continued to have, very negative school experiences which resulted in changing schools or removal from school to a home

schooling environment. Two participants in South East Queensland were currently home schooling their children as a result.

Positive school experiences

Terminology used by the Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment (DET, 2015) to describe "positive school culture" may serve to partially define school experience for this group of children. Terms such as "feeling accepted, valued, respected and included"; experiencing "positive relationships" with other students and teachers; "anti-bullying strategies and programs that develop social and emotional skills"; and being a part of a "safe, caring and connected school environment" all articulate notions of positive experience for children. For intercountry adoptees, positive experiences may also include a sense of belonging in terms of culture, race, and family.

The positive experiences expressed by the three North Queensland parents were in contrast to the many varied, neutral and negative experiences in larger metropolitan centres. This contrast related directly to the number of internationally adopted children in the one school, which the parents believed resulted in a greater awareness by educators and a willingness to embrace, communicate with and support these families. Sharon explained that there were approximately 10 intercountry adoptees in her "fairly small school" which fostered a sense of "freedom to speak" with educators about adoption issues and an assurance that any issues that arose would be dealt with quickly. Robyn, who had several children at the school, spoke of their experience:

> There's always been that embracing attitude, for example when my son came to school for the first time at the age of five the whole class got him to bring in his passport and they all made passports and then they all talked, and they got to go home and ask their families what country their families came from. … If he was having a bad day they'd say, "That's OK, just bring him for half a day tomorrow". So they were very much about recognising his needs and responding to that. So that was a wonderful platform, I guess, to launch into his school career … . Generally, they love school, they love getting up, they enjoy it. They are always looking forward to going (FG2_P2).

Similarly, Leonie spoke of their school's greater awareness and proactive approach to enrolling and supporting her third and fourth children, having had prior experience working with her first two children. This included allocating the additional assistance of a learning support teacher "who had a heart for adoption [and was] just ready to help him fit in". She said, "They knew that he was coming, they knew that he was going to be 4½ when he came to Australia; they knew that when he hit Prep that he was going to need the extra help … she [the support teacher] was marvellous" (FG4_P2).

Parents also highlighted the "normalising" outcome of adoptive families being a part of a culturally diverse school. Katrina said, "We've got a family in Aaron's class who has a white mum and a Sri Lankan dad and the kids say, "Are you adopted too?" Robyn added, "One of my [children] has a little African boy in his class and he said to him the other day, 'I think I'm adopted because I realised I'm darker than my dad.'… so now everyone wants to be adopted".

Neutral school experiences

The request to relate "neutral" school experiences proved difficult for participants, particularly for parents whose perceptions of their children's experiences were varied and did not align with either positive, neutral or negative categories. The term "neutral" was intended to identify whether or not some children's experiences at school may be neither extreme nor different from other children who were not adopted. However, several parents found it difficult to generalise to one of these categories, while three participants chose to "trade off" the positives and negatives and call the experience "neutral". For example, Jenna rationalised her thinking when she said, "I would have to say neutral, because in our family circumstances I've got a broad range. So it would balance out to neutral" (FG2_P3). Seven participants in two focus groups chose instead to defer to a category called "variable experience", indicating that there are both positive and negative experiences involved. Margaret explained:

> I think they can have different experiences at different times … . He has positive experiences with friends, he loves going to school with friends and yes, I think there is a degree of discrimination and racism; and then neutral because behavioural and other issues that he would have are similar to other children (FG4_P3).

Two other parents commented that while some experiences would be similar to non-adopted children, the "extremes are probably greater" (Carter, PG3_P7). Carter explained that, at times, children from overseas may seem intriguing to other children and even popular. At other times, for example when curriculum activities such as "draw your family tree" trigger discussions about birth parents, things can become "real awkward". He stated, "That can be a bit of a low time when that activity comes up" (PG3_P7). Two parents referred to the rigour of the Prep year curriculum for all children, particularly those who are the youngest in the class and have experienced attachment disruption and trauma (Katrina, FG2_P4; Monica, FG3_P5). Two women agreed that the most positive and consistent aspects of their children's school experience have been the friendships developed with other children and the sporting opportunities they have taken up (Caitlyn, FG4_P1; Leonie, FG4_P2). Leonie, who had adopted several children, summed up her children's experience as "at best case it's neutral and worse case it's negative" (FG4_P2). Interestingly, no focus group participants said that their children's school experiences were exactly "neutral" or the same as non-adopted children. All agreed there were differences.

Negative school experiences

Of the 18 parents in the focus groups, four parents across three groups stated that their children's experiences of school were extremely negative. Consequently, Samantha and Kerry are now home schooling their children. Kerry explained that she changed schools twice before concluding that home schooling was the best option for her children. Judy enrolled her children in another school and Caitlyn plans to change her child's enrolment in the New Year. Six months after the interview, Monica also moved her daughter to another school to better suit her needs. The three parents who had already changed schools confirmed that their children's experience has improved significantly in the new contexts.

The most common reason given for their children's negative school experience was the lack of educators' awareness about adoption issues, specifically the impact of anxiety and trauma on a child's behaviour, and the distress caused by some class and school activities. Judy, herself a teacher, said, "In my conversations with them [teachers] I felt they didn't get it". However, after changing schools, things changed: "In their new school, I feel the people who are the administrators do get it, and so I

would say it is now positive" (FG2_P5). Kerry provided several examples where it is apparent that communication between teachers, administrators and parents in the initial transition to school may seriously impair the ongoing relationship needed to work co-operatively to support a child:

> My eldest child went through so much stress that she lost hair in term one, Prep. I found all her hair on the floor, the white tiles downstairs, and that was, "Oh well, that's just a physiological change. Young children lose their hair; lose their baby hair, that's all that is". This same teacher would have to come down and physically remove my daughter from the car, and she was blaming her hair loss on just a physiological change that happened to everybody (FG3_P8).

Caitlyn cited racism and discrimination, including the deliberate targeting of her son by both a child and a teacher, as the reason for his ongoing distress at school (see also Theme 12 – Racial and/or cultural experiences). Another parent believed that, overall, "more people [children] have challenging experiences, whether it's a higher level of anxiety or extreme issues like reading" (Samantha, FG3_P2). However, Nerida (FG3_P1) and Renee (FG3_P4) disagreed, describing the children's experience as "different" but "definitely not weighted [to] one extreme or the other" (FG3_P1).

These parents' perceptions of their children's school experience revealed some key factors emerging. A generally positive experience was fostered when educators understood the needs of the children as a result of their previous experience with adoptive families, or had several adoptees enrolled in the same school. Schools that provided effective support communicated openly with parents about the specific needs of the children. Alternatively, children's negative experience was associated with educators' lack of understanding of adoption-related issues; unwillingness to communicate with parents about the unique needs of the children; and racism or discrimination which was not effectively addressed by the school. These factors continued to pervade ongoing discussion.

5.4.2 Theme 2: Impact of pre-adoption experiences

Following the general perceptions of positive and negative school experience, ensuing discussion explored more specific issues which could influence such

experience. The first specific area of inquiry was that of the impact of various pre-adoption experiences.

Attachment disruption, trauma and "invisible disabilities"

The literature highlights a growing body of knowledge about the lasting effects of trauma in the early years (including poor attachments or attachment disruption, neglect and sensory deprivation) on a child's development (Howard, 2013; Ziegler, 2011). Add to this the difficulty inherent in identifying emotional and behavioural disturbances in children at school, providing appropriate services, resources, and best practice for those who experience such difficulties (Webber & Plotts, 2008), and it is no wonder that this was a topic of much discussion amongst focus group participants. Robyn defined these hard to identify issues for some adoptees as "invisible disabilities" (FG2_P2) and Amanda emphasised the importance of learning better ways of understanding these children's needs:

> The unknown attachment disruptions and trauma and our increasing knowledge of the neurological deficits that that brings about … . I'm increasingly looking with parents at working with OTs. We've got to get a lot better at our sensory processing assessment of these kids, because that too impacts on how their behaviours are managed in school … . Some of these kids have been quite seriously traumatised in their past, so we need to get better at our way of working with them from a team perspective … . We need to be catching them up so that they are then freed up to be able to learn, because a lot of these kids just aren't free to learn (FG1_ASW7).

The complexity of working with children with "unknown" or "invisible" attachment and trauma experiences was highlighted by a parent who compared the needs of her two children. One adopted at an earlier age had a diagnosed and visible physical disability; the other was adopted at the age of five. Robyn said:

> I know certainly, having children who have "the invisible disabilities" compared to a child who has much more obvious [ones]. You know, wheel chair, clubbed feet. Everyone looks at her when she is having a melt-down, "Oh, the poor little thing", you know. When my son's doing it, it's like, "What's his deal?" … . I would pick having something that people can see over the invisible any day (FG2_P2).

Joanne, a mother of two children adopted closer to school age, spent much of her time as a parent helper in the classroom in order to continue to develop attachments while helping her children settle into school. She explained that because her children's inability to speak English was an obvious educational need, "teachers were able to accept that more readily than some of these emotional issues" (PG3_P3). Samantha, now a home school parent, was sympathetic to the attempts made by her child's school to identify her son's needs, requesting she take him to a paediatrician and a psychologist (FG3_P2). Samantha, Penny and Kerry agreed that their school personnel did not know what to do for these children and so urged them to undergo extensive testing. Penny added, "They're not trained to deal with all this other baggage" (FG3_P6) and Kerry agreed, "Yes, more emotional, social, [and] anxiety" (FG3_P8).

Given the relatively small number of intercountry adoptees in Australian classrooms today, it would not be surprising if many teachers in this country had little knowledge regarding children's pre-adoption experiences. For older adoptees, previous school experience in a less privileged country or life in an orphanage setting may have an impact on their current development across a range of domains (Makame, Ani, & Grantham-McGregor, 2002; Monasch & Boerma, 2004; Oshima & Domaleski, 2006). Having sound knowledge of life in the children's birth countries, Emily said:

> Children are often physically punished in schools in some of our overseas countries, whereas that's not what's done here. So there is sometimes that fear as well from children, that if they do or say the wrong thing that they'll be physically punished. So that raises their level of anxiety as well … [it happens in] some of the orphanages, as well (FG1_ASW2).

Leanne added that these children would be best served if teachers take an "interest in understanding a child's background … to learn about a child's pre-adoption experiences and trauma". She warned against "categorizing them and thinking that one approach will work" (FG1_ASW5).

Awareness of brain development, trauma and impact on learning

Several parents and adoption workers across three focus groups discussed the impact of trauma on brain development, the lack of environmental stimulus and adequate nutrition that many experience in their early years, and the significance of

these experiences to the ongoing health and well-being of the children and their ability to learn. Several participants acknowledged that early experiences of trauma and loss are not exclusive to intercountry adoptees, but are relevant for children from a range of backgrounds (Katrina, FG2_4; Kerry, FG3_P8). Discussions showed a growing determination on the part of adoptive parents to understand the implications. Kerry attempted to explain:

> It's the neural pathways, the lack of nutrition in utero, the early beginning[s], the lack of floor time, the lack of that sensory one-to-one touch. This has got to come into this conversation, I think. … . [The] central nervous system is all jangled up by the time we bring our precious babies home (FG3_P8).

Amanda emphasised the need for more specialised medical and post-adoption services to assist parents in working with schools to support their children (FG1_ASW7). Some parents identified the challenge of obtaining an accurate medical diagnosis for their children, which enables them to receive additional support in school (Joanne, FG3_P3) while others appeared confident when talking about their child's needs:

> With regards to a diagnosis of ADD/ADHD, dyslexia … my child's actually been told [he's] on the spectrum with this Semantic Pragmatic Receptive Language issue and auditory processing issue and a sensory processing issue. … Like every single one of these things, [it] is all a brain issue (Samantha, FG3_P2).

Overall, there was some awareness by adoption and support workers (FG1_ASW7) and parents (FG2_P4; FG2_P5; FG3_P8; FG2_P2) of the link between brain development, trauma, behaviour and learning, although generally this appeared to be limited. Two parents highlighted negative experiences at school which may have led to their independent research (FG2_P5; FG3_P8). Another parent explained that she had previously been called on by a government body to share her knowledge and understanding with prospective adoptive parents (FG2_P2). Clearly, there is a need for further research, professional development and training for all parties who work with and support intercountry adoptees.

5.4.3 Theme 3: Childhood development and the adoption experience

Individual growth and maturation, psychological well-being, and environmental factors influence development (Woolfolk & Margetts, 2016).

Understanding childhood development is not straight forward but is enmeshed in debates about the impact of nature versus nurture, the continuous versus discontinuous nature of development, and the importance of critical or sensitive periods for developing certain abilities (such as language), especially during early childhood (Woolfolk & Margetts, 2016). All four focus groups discussed ways in which intercountry adoptees process their pre- and post-adoption experience as they mature, and parents noted how this has affected them socially, emotionally and academically at school. These observations included the children's level of maturity, growing awareness of their personal adoption story, and their unique personality and degree of resilience. Environmental factors such as parental involvement in school had some bearing on the children's experience.

Maturity and awareness of adoption story: A lifelong journey

While current adoption practice favours children being raised with the knowledge of their adoption story through age appropriate communication with their adoptive parents (Brodzinsky, 2006, 2011; Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002; Macrae, 2006; Melina, 1998; Pertman, 2006), the information that children have about their birth country and family varies significantly between countries of origin and with individual circumstances. Children who were abandoned may have little or no background information, while others have photo albums and mementos which were put together for the child by foster family members or orphanage workers. Three groups reported that the children's developing maturity and awareness of their adoption story influence how they manage certain experiences at school.

Monica argued that the developmental implications of adoption are evident in the early years of school as children gain a greater sense of their "individuality", a "sense of the world" and more "mature understanding" (FG3_P5). Robyn observed that young children tend to articulate that it is "kind of cool to be different, it's cool to be adopted" (FG2_P2); however, as children mature, parents are often presented with more intimate questions and concerns. Monica, whose daughter has photos of her birth family including her actual birth, commented that her daughter at age five (adopted at 7 weeks of age) spent the whole of January, before commencing grade one, searching for answers. Her mother encouraged open dialogue and recalled her daughter's comments:

> I want to know more about it…. I want to know more about her…. I want to know why I couldn't stay there – really…. Am I in the right place?… Should I be over there?… I'm not really sure where I belong…. Is she all right? What's she doing?… I don't understand why I couldn't stay (FG3_P5).

Some adoptees, especially those adopted at a young age, may have no explicit memory (facts, dates, names, places) of their early life experience; however, they may retain implicit traumatic memories (images, emotions, unpleasant sensations) (Ziegler, 2011, p. 46). Samantha commented that her family lights a candle when her son is thinking about his birth mother and that the experience is "very deeply felt" (FG3_P2). Monica agreed that "it's very present … and it brings it all up, going to school". She explained the difficulty faced by her daughter as she commenced grade one:

> … there are these massive issues that she's grappling with that are always kind of churning along in the background. Sometimes she'll be like, "I couldn't concentrate at school today, because I was thinking about my birth mother" (FG3_P5).

Both Robyn and Jenna agreed that children in the upper primary years may be "more selective in sharing" (FG2_P2) information about themselves and may need additional support.

> With our kids as they are growing older, they go through one stage and then you get help and you know, great benefits, or they progress really well after the help [is] provided. Then they get to the next stage and it all seems to fall apart. But they've reached a different age, a different level of maturity and they're processing their whole story again from a totally different angle (FG2_P3).

Amanda identified a particular challenge for adoptees approaching adolescence when identity and relationships become more significant, and the issue of skin colour or other physical differences often resurfaces. She recalled one young man stating, "She's not gonna like me because my eyes look like this" (FG1_ASW7).

If a child is adopted by a loving and supportive family, this is not the end of the story. Developmentally, adoptees are on a life-long journey which resurfaces at various and significant times and periods (Brodzinsky, 2006, 2011). Educators who

understand this will more likely be open to communicating with parents and the children themselves, and ready to provide appropriate support as needed.

Personality and resilience

While all children go through developmental changes that may challenge them, their degree of resilience in response to life's challenges is influenced by both personal and environmental factors. The effect of genetic predisposition, temperament, and institutional exposure on a child's personality and resilience is inconclusive (Huang & Invernizzi, 2012); however, three focus groups identified the child's unique personality as significant in terms of how they navigate their adoption/school experience. Brett (FG4_P5), Jenna (FG2_P3) and Robyn (FG2_P2) compared the personalities of two of their children who had had very similar pre- and post-adoption experiences, and explained that each child deals with their experience differently at school. Brett said that his son "listens out" for the comments of other children such as, "He's no good 'cause he's different", whereas his daughter "wouldn't hear someone say that … she's just kind of having too much fun" (FG4_P5). Jenna commented that one of her sons embraces the fact that he is adopted "with enthusiastic energy" and is more likely to say, "Yeah, this is me. Cool, hey?" whereas her other son is more likely to retort, "None of your business" when asked personal questions. Robyn agreed that any two children with similar backgrounds and experiences may "react to the trauma and stress" differently. Brett also emphasised the influence of other personalities in a classroom. He said, "Personality of the teacher, personality of the child, personalities in the classroom … I think personality can't be under-rated in all of this" (FG4_P5).

The importance of helping adoptees develop resilience strategies was highlighted by Sharon who explained that comments and questions from other children "didn't really come up" before her son started school, but became problematic once he commenced school. Referring to the W.I.S.E. Up! Program (Schoettle, 2000; see also Chapter 2) Sharon said, "I'd have to say, after doing W.I.S.E. Up I cannot believe the amount of questions that have been firing at [him]. I'm so glad we did that. 'Cause at the time I didn't think he really got it, but he obviously did" (FG2_P1).

While adoptees internalise their adoption experience in different ways as they grow and mature, personality may pre-dispose them to positive or negative

experiences at school. Building resilience and developing personal strategies may empower them to successfully navigate issues as they arise. Teachers may help all children by developing explicit strategies and ways of working with children to foster resilience in the classroom and playground.

Parents' involvement in school

Evidence suggests that parental involvement in school is influential in raising children's achievement levels (Becker-Weidman, 2009a). The degree of parental involvement, particularly in the early years of school, was raised as a minor consideration by two focus groups. This included parents taking on volunteer roles within the school, attending scheduled activities and events, and participating in some class activities.

Leanne (FG1_ASW5) stated that, in some cases, particularly with young children, the degree of parental involvement in their children's school community can make a difference to the children's experience of school. She explained that "some parents have said that they find it makes a noticeable difference for their child if they can go to tuckshop and they can attend sporting days, do rotations in the classroom, and show their face". While parental involvement in school may benefit many young children, when family difference is normalised in the school setting children may feel more comfortable than when parents rarely appear and the difference becomes more obvious to others. Leanne explained, however, that children's reaction to their parents at school is not always consistent. She stated that some children feel "embarrassed" by their parents' appearance at school and shared that one of her clients, a parent of a child in grade two, told her, "He gets embarrassed when I come into the school grounds and he runs away" (FG1_ASW5). While this reaction could be a result of family difference in an adoptive family, this is inconclusive as it could also be a reaction of non-adoptees to their parents visiting school.

Katrina highlighted, however, the value of parents going into the classroom to support their children in their early years at school when they are required to talk about their family or personal history in class presentations. She explained that it was a "positive experience" when her son's class teacher gave her advanced notice of a presentation task he was required to do on his family, and facilitated her attendance. Katrina felt welcome in the classroom and sat beside her son while he did his

presentation, which she believed made a difference to him (FG2_P4). She explained that her son seemed proud when he said to his classmates, "Actually, I've got three mothers, and I've got three fathers because I've got my birth mother and I've got my foster mother and then I've got my forever mother."

Like other children, adoptees may have mixed reactions to their parents' participation in school life. What is apparent is that when family difference is normalised, when children are supported in sharing about their family and personal history, and when parents are welcomed by the teacher in this support role, anxiety in both the child and the parent is reduced. It may also help to build confidence, security and a sense of belonging in young adoptees. Focus group data reinforce theories of childhood development which suggest that development occurs across a range of domains over time and is affected by maturation, growth, environmental factors and psychological wellness (Woolfolk & Margetts, 2016). This study suggests that additional factors such as a child's personality, the way in which adoptees internalise their adoption experience over time, as well as their capacity for resilience, are all significant to their school experience.

5.4.4 Theme 4: Transitions through each phase of learning

In response to Australian federal and state government perspectives on age/grade placement and progression of children from diverse backgrounds (ACARA, 2010), and the emphasis on successful transitions to school (Powell, 2010), the issue of managing transitions for intercountry adoptees was discussed by all four focus groups. In particular, adoption and support workers highlighted a dilemma for parents who adopt a child close to or of school age, and the decision to start school or to spend time developing attachments (and for some children, basic language skills) prior to starting school. Also, socially constructed practices involved in the transition of children to primary school, between teachers and year levels and then beyond to high school, were discussed by all groups.

Transition to primary school: The dilemma

Given the impact of pre-adoption experience on attachment and bonding, and on adjustment, behaviour and learning, the decision as to when to start adoptees in school, particularly those arriving close to or of school age, is a dilemma for some families. Adoption and support workers urge parents of older children to keep their

newly adopted children at home for a period of twelve months before commencing school in order to secure family attachments. Emily (FG1_ASW2) stated, "I think that is one of our biggest issues … families wanting to put children into school really quickly". Amanda also felt strongly that newly arrived older adoptees should have time to develop family bonds before commencing school.

> While some kids are OK going to school, I think we need a lot more emphasis on kids staying home longer, because when kids already come with attachment deficits, we're actually replicating an avoidant attachment pattern by them not having to form that one-on-one, because they can just skip back into replicating this institutional thing. They're quite good and they're OK and they can manage, but we are missing out on them actually doing that relationship stuff that they need to have done one-on-one-with a parent (FG1_ASW7).

Adoption and support workers also understood parents' dilemma. Amanda said, "There is a lot of anxiety around education. I mean they want to get their kids back to school so that they are coping" (FG1_ASW7). Also, according to Emily, "The kids are asking to go to school" (FG1_ASW2). She explained that children who have previously lived in an institutionalised setting or attended school in their birth country are generally used to being with other children. Terri agreed:

> Normalcy for a child who is adopted, perhaps six years old who moves to Australia, is … having lots of other children around them. The environment that they've known hasn't been them and two care-givers, for example. So there is a lot of familiarity for a child to just be around other children as well (FG1_ASW1).

Emily shared a conversation with a recent adoptee who, when asked about the best thing about going to school, said, "Not being lonely", as he was now an only child with two parents, one of whom worked. Interestingly, the issue of time at home versus when to start school was not an issue raised in parent focus groups. While the reason was not evident, it may not have been an issue for the majority of participants if they felt they had sufficient time to bond with their child before starting school, or if they prioritised starting school over time at home. Similarly, meeting Education Department requirements of securing age-appropriate year-level placements was not raised in any of the focus groups.

Some participants described positive experiences for the children as they commenced school, while others shared negative experiences which caused them to withdraw their child, change schools or decide to home school. Emily said that a number of schools "have been absolutely amazing in terms of the transition … allowing parents to stay in the classroom, as long as necessary, really involving them in the process" (FG1_ASW2). For example, Leonie's experience with her youngest son's transition to school was a very positive one (see Theme 1: Type of school experience), where the school was ready and willing to support him when he arrived. In contrast, Kerry, who now home schools her children, said that there were no transition strategies put in place for her daughter who experienced extreme separation anxiety, which she believed was compounded by her daughter's prior experience and fear of abandonment. Kerry explained that the only thing she could do was to volunteer as a parent helper, but that in doing so, she felt she was treated with "utter contempt" because she was "the helicopter parent" (FG3_P8). Kerry explained that in the prep year, her daughter was "popular", "quite intelligent" and a "contradiction" in that:

> She would be the child in the centre of the group and all the other children would be following her around. However, her anxiety was overwhelming for her. She cried all day long. The teachers were actually annoyed by it in the end …. We were just given platitudes instead of really trying to understand that she didn't have any separation anxiety or abandonment trauma issues until her first day at school, and that was it. She just went downhill (FG3_P8).

The sometimes incongruent beliefs about the transitional needs of children who were adopted at or closer to school age warrant further investigation. Current state government policy invites all key stakeholders to collaborate when developing and implementing appropriate transition strategies to cater for each child's unique needs. By involving parents and relevant external agencies in developing a common understanding of relevant pre-adoptive experiences as well as possible attachment, trauma and/or anxiety issues, teams would be well placed to develop a tailored transition program for each child on a needs basis.

Ongoing transitions: Teachers, year levels and high school

Focus groups identified "ongoing transitions" as distinct from the transition to primary school. This included the transition between year levels and teachers, as well as the transition to high school. Often problematic, participants identified the transition between year levels to new teachers and classmates, as well as the challenges of passing on knowledge and understanding about the children to the next teacher. Amanda suggested that crucial to this process was having the same principal in subsequent years who was proactive in establishing processes for "passing on some of that information and knowledge" (FG1_ASW7). Emily provided an example where such a process worked well for a particular child:

> The year 2 teacher met with the year 3 teacher and did a special introduction around the family and the child and then had a private meeting with the parents, about that particular child's needs and what had worked really well that year and what hadn't …. Often you don't know who your teacher's going to be until the first day of school, but that was causing a lot of anxiety for that child, so they made a bit of an exception and made sure that she knew before going back to school the next year (FG1_ASW2).

Leanne (FG1_ASW5) identified a common approach often taken by parents who meet with the new teacher before the start of the year in an attempt to share relevant information about their child. Interestingly, she said that the success of such meetings "really depends on the school and the teacher, down to what their social lens is" (FG1_ASW5). Parents who had already navigated the transition to high school commented on the difficulties in sharing adoption-related information with teachers once the children go to high school, where they are no longer communicating with one main teacher, but with many.

Some parents identified their concerns about their child's readiness for high school, the need for routines, as well as the security of consistent friendships. While biological parents may also identify with these concerns, Robyn stated, "When you've got kids who don't self-regulate very well … I'm a little nervous" (FG2_P2). Leonie commented on the value of "schools that go from prep to year 12" (FG4_P2) so that children can retain their circle of friends. Katrina, however, believed it really depended on the school chosen. She described her children's high school which

minimises the movement of children between classes and teachers in Year 7, and aims to minimise the impact of change (FG2_P4).

Focus group participants identified that transitions between year levels, teachers and schools may challenge children who require the security of routines and established friendships. Some parents are concerned about explaining adoption-related issues to new teachers each year. Schools which place a high priority on transition programs between primary and secondary school and which streamline processes for passing on information between year levels and teachers will further support all children and their parents who find these transitions difficult.

5.4.5 Theme 5: Type and selection of education system or school

In Australia, parents have several options when selecting the most appropriate education system and school for their children. The three main school-based systems are: the Catholic Education system, the Independent Schools system (Christian and non-denominational) and the State school system. Alternatively, parents may register to "home school" their children[18]. Non-government schools are often termed "private" schools, while government schools are often called "public" schools. Increasingly, research identifies parents' anxiety in relation to system and school choice and the variety of reasons for their selection (Cahill & Gray, 2010).

Parents in this study gave a range of reasons for choosing a particular type of education system or school for their children; however, most choices were based on their perception of the protective factors afforded their children. Christian/family values, acceptance of family and cultural diversity, and consistency of friendships across the years of schooling were important considerations. There was no direct evidence to suggest that parents chose a particular system or school based solely on their own or their children's birth religious affiliations. Issues such as parents feeling unwelcome in the school, racism, inappropriate language support for their children,

[18] ***Catholic Education:*** non-government; run according to Catholic principles and practices. (http://www.ncec.catholic.edu.au)
Independent Schools: non-government; cater for diverse groups such as those run by Christian organisations or other affiliations, such as: ethnic groups; boarding schools; single sex schools; schools for Indigenous students.
(http://isca.edu.au/about-independent-schools/)
State schools: government funded, non-denominational (http://education.qld.gov.au/corporate/about/)
Home school: parents register to educate their children at home according to guidelines (http://education.qld.gov.au/parents/home-education/about.html)

or failed communication between parents and school staff about the needs of their children were amongst the reasons why some parents chose to change schools. In some cases, when children continued to exhibit extreme fears and anxieties or when parents believed schools could not meet the needs of their children, home schooling was preferred.

Reasons for choosing a system or school

Robyn's son, adopted at age five, demonstrated an "independent streak" and a lack of trust, having "been let down by all of his authority figures, all his close connections". She said that he "questioned everything" including his own self-worth and she believed he would be easily led by others. She chose an independent Christian school so he could form friendships with other children from families with similar "values [and] morals" to her own family. She derived a "sense of security" from this decision "that when he makes a friendship, there's a 99% chance that it's a good friendship". She did not want to risk the possibility that a state school with "a higher element of kids who were more mischievous and naughty" would influence him negatively. Instead, she wanted him "to go to a school where the values were taught in the classrooms, [and] sort of adhered to by friends' parents", and where those around him were "singing the same song" (FG2_P2).

In addition to family values, Brett and his wife Debbie (FG4_P5; FG4_P4), chose to send their children to a small independent Christian school at which they believed their family would be accepted by the school community. Brett identified "socio-economic status", "class" and "acceptance" as key considerations in their choice of school, noting that "middle class" schools were more accepting of their family and less "patronising" (FG4_P5). For other parents, the cultural diversity of a school was an important consideration. Katrina believed that the private schools in her regional area offered greater recognition of the "cultural mix" within their schools through cultural days and ceremonies, more so than the state schools (FG2_P4). In contrast, Leonie stated that her experience with private schools in the greater metropolitan area was "horrendous" and that the state system "was a lot better, a lot more diverse, a lot more accepting of difference". Having said that, at the time of the focus group, she was investigating another private school to send her children to but confessed, "We're just really scared, as a whole family, because we stepped into the elite private school and really experienced racism" (FG4_P2). Penny

and Carter (FG3_P6; FG3_P7), whose employment requires their family to move interstate regularly, acknowledged the challenges that this brings their children. Recently, they discovered a local Hip Hop dance troupe with the same cultural background as their son. They were currently investigating where the children in the dance troupe attended school, to consider enrolling their son there also.

For Monica, whose daughter is an only child, it was important to enrol her in a P-12 school where she could establish and maintain friendships throughout her years at school (FG3_P5). At the time of the interview, Monica was happy with this decision; however, this changed shortly afterwards which led to a change of schools (See Chapter 6, Case context 6.4.8, for further developments).

Despite the variety of reasons given by parents for the type and selection of education system or school for their children, the general importance of choice was highlighted. While the consideration of family values and consistency of friendships may be similar for homogeneous white Australian families, issues of family and cultural diversity (including racism and acceptance of family difference), were additional considerations for many of these families.

Changing schools and home schooling

Despite the careful consideration given to the choice of initial school placement, some parents subsequently found it necessary to change schools. Caitlyn planned to move her son to another school the following year. Her grievances included "racism … discrimination both with children, but probably more so with the teachers", and what she stated was the deliberate "targeting" of her son with less than satisfying responses or outcomes. Caitlyn expressed the need for greater empathy, teacher training and language support, specifically for adoptees. Her case highlighted the frustration that parents may experience as a result of ineffectual communication between home and school (see Theme 10: Communication, and Chapter 6 Case: The Wilson Family) leading to mistrust and tension between parties.

> Every incident I put in an email and I put it in my school file, and I've got lists. Lists and lists and when I correspond to them, they refuse to answer me in writing. They will only do it verbally (FG4_P1).

Kerry enrolled her two daughters in an independent school where they remained for a little over a year, before she moved them to a second school. She

explained why she now home schools both children. At the first school, she wanted to be able to spend some time on campus as an additional support for her youngest daughter who was starting prep. "I offered my time to be a worker in the library during the lunch time, as a parent volunteer, because they needed people. They told me to stay home." When she endeavoured to discuss her daughter's social needs, Kerry said the response was, "If your daughter has social issues in the playground, then what better way for her to learn socially, than a baptism of fire?" (FG3_P8). Kerry had been home schooling her children for 12 months prior to the focus group interviews, and described the outcome:

> The separation anxiety is virtually non-existent, the abandonment/trauma issues that were brought up in my second child, my youngest daughter, have completely gone away …. I no longer have to peel them off the ceiling ... my eldest child no longer gets a cough that doesn't go away …. She throws up every night throughout the night every winter … gone. And the feeling, "I'm going to be ill" on the way to school – all that's gone. Everything's gone …. My daughters are maturing, blossoming .... It's like a war zone as far as I'm concerned, in those school yards, I'm sorry (FG3_P8).

In contrast to previous examples, Samantha could not be happier with the school's attempts to support her son's needs, but ultimately decided "it wasn't enough for him" and also turned to home schooling. "We had a brilliant teacher, great school, good principal, [who] tried everything". However, although he was adopted quite young, at six months of age, he experienced constant "anxiety", "hypervigilance" and "fear of abandonment" when his mother was not with him. This happened both in kindergarten and in his prep year and by the time he reached grade one his anxiety was "just overwhelming". He would "run screaming out of the classroom" (FG3_P2). She described her son's needs more specifically:

> [He] needs to have a place where he feels safe, where the unexpected isn't going to happen, where he knows people are going to be there. He knows the environment. One of the scariest things for him is going into a new environment or new people. If you met him, he is an incredible outgoing, confident appearing child, but those things will trigger his anxiety - so feeling safe, feeling like nothing bad can happen to him (FG3_P2).

Having home schooled her son for over two years, Samantha argued that this was the best option for her son: "It makes a huge difference to him … we're [19] 'unschooling' now. So he's in charge of his learning" (FG3_P2).

This study suggested that a key consideration of adoptive parents in the selection of an education system or school for their children is the protective factors the choice offers. Along with family values, cultural and family diversity, appropriate and consistent friendships, and the ability of schools to cater for specific and individual needs (such as trauma-related anxiety) were important. When parents perceive that a school cannot understand or cater for their child's adoption-related needs they will often seek alternatives. Type and selection of system or school or the decision to change schooling options was not identified as an issue by adoption and support workers. This may be due to their limited involvement with adoptive families around issues of school selection, particularly once the final adoption order is made.

5.4.6 Theme 6: The teacher

While the type and selection of education system and school was important to adoptive parents, more significant was the teacher themselves, regardless of the school. Parent opinion supported John Hattie's argument that, apart from the children themselves, "It is what teachers know, do and care about" that makes the most significant difference to student success at school (Hattie, 2003, p. 2). Several parents confirmed this view: "I think the schools make a big difference and certainly, the teacher makes the really big difference" (Penny, FG3_P6); "The school experience from a child's perspective is all about the teacher" (Monica, FG3_P5); "It's the teacher who's the most important" (Joanne, FG3_P3). All four focus groups argued the significance of personal qualities, traits and skills of teachers; their attitude, sensitivity and awareness of children's adoption and pre-adoption experiences; and their willingness to acquire knowledge and understanding of the impact of trauma on children from complex backgrounds.

[19] The term ***"unschooling"*** was originally used by educator John Holt to describe removing a child from school. It became a synonym for "homeschooling" and now refers more to child-centred learning approaches (Gray & Riley, 2013; Griffith, 1998).

Personal qualities, traits and skills

The personal qualities that adoptive parents collectively sought in their children's teachers included being open, receptive and comfortable when talking about adoption and their children's specific needs and being nurturing, calm and structured as opposed to "a shouter" (FG4_P1) or someone who is unclear about expectations. Parents also valued teachers who could build their child's sense of self-worth and confidence and who understood anxiety issues. Robyn attributed some of her children's positive experience of school to her ability to contribute to the selection of the most suitable teachers who possess some of these qualities, traits and skills.

> To me it's always been about the teacher they've had at that time. And even though I can honestly say that our experience has been very positive, I've also been very selective as to what teachers my children have had. So I can think of two … I know that if my children had been with those particular teachers, just because [of] their interpersonal skills, our experience may not have been so positive. But I've deliberately sought out the more nurturing personalities (FG2_P2).

Judy agreed that she had had similar opportunities (FG2_P5), while others stated that they needed to be more "proactive", and "willing to be assertive", if necessary, on this point (FG2_P1; FG2_P4; FG2_P5).

When teachers are open, receptive and comfortable when communicating about adoption-related issues, school experiences are more likely to be positive. "Nurturing" teachers may be better suited to children who have experienced significant trauma, who continue to experience fear or anxiety, or who lack self-worth or confidence. Some parents identified these traits in their children's teachers, the positive relationships developed, and the teacher's ability to build their child's social and emotional competence. For example, Debbie said:

> She just clicked so well with her teacher. She's a young, pretty teacher, who adores our daughter … previous to starting, our daughter had social issues. She hasn't been able to make friends and she doesn't know how to behave appropriately, but this year we have seen her make friends and do well and it's a lot to do with her teacher. For her to get a "self-control" award this year, I cried, because I wouldn't think that that would be possible for her. I

> don't know, I think it's more just helped her confidence. "I fit in, I belong, I'm loved and therefore I can make friends" (FG4_P4).

It became apparent in the parent focus groups that some parents hold teachers highly accountable when their children's adoption experience (past and present) is not understood. Generally, parents wanted teachers to understand their child's experience. Caitlyn explained her son's previous experience in an orphanage located in a war-ravaged area, and his inability to cope with raised voices or shouting. She described the attributes of two different teachers – one which hindered, one which helped her son. She recalled a letter she wrote to the first teacher:

> There is one thing that he just cannot tolerate and that's being shouted at. He cannot stand a raised voice. He physically shakes and he gets really distressed about raised voices. So if you have a problem with him, punish him in some other form but please don't shout at him (FG4_P1).

Caitlyn described this teacher, however, as "a shouter", not only with her son but with other children in general, and the relationship between parent, teacher and child became unproductive. The next teacher was different. "He listened. He's not a shouter. He's very calm, but he's strict, straight down the line. There's no grey area, black and white. [My son] understands that" (FG4_P1). Other parents also voiced strong opinions about the impact of the teacher on their children's sense of self-worth and/or level of anxiety. Margaret said, "Last year he'd come home 'I'm handsome' and full of confidence. This year 'I'm a loser. I'm stupid', and she has just destroyed him in six months" (FG4_P3). Penny also said, "Our grade one teacher ripped the soul out of our little boy so much he went back to wetting the bed of a night time, to waking up screaming" (FG3_P6). Once again, these strong sentiments suggest that some adoptive parents are very concerned about teachers' ability to support their children's social and emotional development at school, and pay particular attention to this.

Monica compared two teachers' different approaches and the resultant outcomes. One teacher phoned her to discuss her daughter's impromptu story about her adoption in her prep class. Ongoing communication helped the teacher to support both Monica's daughter and the other children in the class with this topic. A subsequent teacher, however, showed signs of discomfort from the outset when talking about adoption-related issues which closed down lines of communication.

When Monica met with her to talk: "She was so uncomfortable with it, that she just shut down and started talking about something else" (FG3_P5). Monica had attempted to explain that it was important for her daughter to feel supported by her parents at special school events and asked to be notified of these to ensure they could attend. She said, "You can't have a child who's adopted sitting there with other parents and her parents now not there watching her" (FG3_P5). However, Monica had left the meeting feeling "very frustrated" that the teacher had not understood why this was important. She explained what happened next:

> … a few weeks later she got "Student of the Week" and I wasn't told. And we actually specifically said, if she gets Student of the Week, if she gets any awards, if there's anything on assembly or anything that she's participating in, we will be there. And of course, my rage, you could feel my rage all over South East Queensland. I was just so ... she didn't see it. I just totally lost it and I just had to go outside and cry. I rang the teacher and she just didn't get it (FG3_P5).

Joanne, a teacher, took a more pragmatic approach, and knew only too well the challenge and the time constraints inherent in catering for "thirty kids in the class, [and] every one of them is an individual". She said, "How much time do you have as an educator to wrap your head around all those differences in the classroom?" (FG3_P3). Leanne suggested that more experienced teachers should work with children with specific needs, as less experienced teachers need "a lot more guidance and direction" (FG2_ASW5). Emily stated, however, that "so much of it comes down to the teacher's willingness to learn and understand and be flexible as well" (FG2_ASW2). It is evident from the four focus groups that participants generally agreed that the teachers' personal qualities, traits and skills are paramount to the experience of intercountry adoptees at school.

Attitude, sensitivity and awareness

Parents unanimously agreed with Penny that "teachers' attitudes, sensitivity and awareness" (FG3_P6) are key to an adoptee's school experience. Nerida argued that it is helpful when teachers are sensitive to potential triggers for these children at school or are "open" and "willing" to seek the support of parents when uncertain (FG3_P1). Renee stated that when teachers accept that the parents know their child

and are not just being "over-anxious", teachers and parents are able to work together productively to support the child (FG3_P4).

Judy recounted an example where a teacher's lack of sensitivity to her son's adoption experience and his cultural background caused him significant grief:

> [My son] still retells occasionally, his little story about Mary McKillop Feast Day at his previous school. So they did a big topic about how Mary McKillop went into all the orphanages and looked after all these poor orphans who were just destitute and had nothing to eat. And he still remembers the name of the little girl who turned to him with a big smile on her face and just laughed at him as the teacher was discussing this topic. I'd said to him, "What did you do?" and he said, "I cried". And I said, "So what did the teacher do?" [He replied] "Nothing mum"…. Then soon after that they were watching a video for Caritas, you know like fund raising, and it was for poverty in the streets of the Philippines, in Manila. He could see himself in the video, talking about these poor people who had nothing, and he came home and started wrecking the house. He was just devastated (FG2_P5).

Judy, also a teacher, suggested a more sensitive approach which may have empowered her son rather than embarrassed and upset him. She said, "If she'd have asked me to come in and talk about our experiences in [his birth country] and what it was like and how we could help these people … we could do a little presentation together" (FG2_P5). She felt this would have given her son a positive role in raising awareness about the plight of orphans with the support of his mother. Adoption workers and parents both raised issues and provided examples about teacher sensitivity when implementing various activities such as these in the classroom (See also Theme 10: Curriculum experiences).

Teacher attitudes that foster open and positive communication with adoptive parents may prevent choices and outcomes that inadvertently impact negatively on a child. A teacher who desires to understand the individual needs of all children, who is sensitive to different cultural backgrounds and family contexts, and who supports a more interactive approach with families, particularly in the younger grades, is more likely to enhance the school experiences of children in general.

Knowledge and understanding

Sensitivity to needs presumes a fundamental awareness of those needs, so it was not surprising that all groups expressed the need for teachers to gain greater knowledge and understanding about the impact of pre-adoption experience and trauma on children who were adopted internationally. Leonie emphasised, however, that such understanding is more far-reaching than simply this group of children, but should extend to all "children from hard places, children from complex, difficult backgrounds; because it won't just be our children facing exactly what we are talking about here" (FG4_P2). Jenna, a health professional, believed that a general lack of understanding about the impact of trauma on children goes beyond the education arena and is also not well understood by health professionals. She added:

> Our kids aren't that special that they are the only ones. Crikey, there are so many other kids in our everyday life who are in traumatic experiences now and have been in traumatic experiences from the beginning, and they are in exactly the same boat. They just don't have different coloured skin (FG2_P3).

Terri identified a lack of knowledge and understanding on the part of schools as a main reason for adoptive parents seeking post-adoption support.

> My experience has been that parents will contact [us]when they feel that the school doesn't understand their child's pre-adoption experience and doesn't then understand how or what the school needs to do to meet their child's needs in response to that experience (FG1_ASW1).

Kerry conceded that "potential issues" for intercountry adoptees are not issues for all of the children; however, in her child's case she said teachers were "just completely oblivious to the issues" (FG3_P8) her daughter faced. Caitlyn argued that educators need to accept that there are differences between children in adoptive families and children living with their biological families (FG4_P1). Debbie provided the example of some "acting out" behaviour that "is possibly coming from a different place than a child that's not from a hard place. They don't see that" (FG4_P4).

Participants agreed that a lack of knowledge and understanding leads to concerns about the children being downplayed by educators. Emily recalled conversations with teachers who have indicated, "We are really experienced. We

know. We've seen it all" even though they may never before have, for example, taught an older intercountry adoptee. Recalling her parent/school liaison work, Emily stated that educators sometimes consider regression in a child's behaviour at home that is not evident at school as "more a parenting issue than it is anything to do with school" or that the behaviours exhibited are common to all children. She recalled a principal stating:

> "My child doesn't want to go to school sometimes either", but not really understanding that this child was actually not sleeping, had regressed to, you know, wetting themselves to the point where they had to go to a paediatrician for assistance … and couldn't see that it was related to when she was at school … she was actually just too scared to display those behaviours at school (FG1_ASW2).

Caitlyn was visibly upset when she recalled her attempts to explain to her son's teacher the impact of pre-adoption trauma experience on his behaviours at school.

> [The teacher said] "I know he's had adversities but all children have adversities". She said, "When I was a child my parents split up" and I went, "You had parents, you had grandparents, you had cousins, sisters, brothers. My child has got nothing. Don't compare a broken marriage which I know is horrible for a child … to somebody that's come from a war-torn third world country and has the scars to prove it. Just don't go there" (FG4_P1).

Jenna also said that her attempts at explaining her son's needs to experienced teachers at school have been fraught with frustration which has led to her second-guessing her own judgement and understanding.

> So I will say to someone who's been a teacher for years and years that my child is having trouble at school and how the trauma is affecting him … [teacher says] "What are you talking about? You're talking nonsense" [I say] "No, no, no, ….". So I've got to be really careful who I talk to because they don't get it. I'm talking about massive sensory issues. He was three when we picked him up. The other one was one, but in an orphanage from day one … but no, they don't understand trauma. And so even then, it feels like I question myself as well and I'm thinking, am I telling myself lies about this trauma thing, because no one else gets it. Maybe it's all in our heads. Maybe we are making up excuses. Then I go no, no, no, but I see the evidence … so I still have that wrestle myself (FG2_P3).

A number of parents expressed the need to explain "trauma" in terms that are more easily understood in relation to the adoptee's experience. Samantha said, "Unless your child has come from what people would consider an abusive background, either physically, sexually or emotionally … they don't know" what this type of trauma means (FG3_P2). Instead, terms such as "loss", "stress" or "distress" (Robyn, FG2_P2) were referred to by participants, which Monica said, "Goes to the emotional state of the child" (FG3_P5). Nerida explained, "People understand distress better, because we have all been distressed. We haven't all been traumatised. And it's the stress that should be focused on" (FG3_P1).

It could be argued that teachers who lack knowledge and understanding about the needs of intercountry adoptees do so due to a general lack of education or experience with this group of children. However, when teachers gain knowledge and experience about teaching children from diverse backgrounds, including minority groups with complex needs, they may become more aware that specific learning needs exist for different groups of children**.** Teachers in schools with a number of adoptees are therefore more likely to understand the impact of adoption-related issues on the children at their school. In a regional school with approximately 10 adoptees, Robyn said the teachers demonstrate a level of understanding about the implications of her daughter's early years in foster care prior to adoption and about what she calls her daughter's "invisible" needs. She recalls a teacher telling her, "She has global developmental delays that would have been impaired because she didn't have the nurturing family and that consistency of routine for those two years. Oh, she's so far behind" (FG2_P2).

Participants confirmed that the teacher is integral to the school experience of intercountry adoptees. Adoptive parents often seek out teachers with nurturing and empathetic attitudes to best support their children, particularly when they experience social or emotional difficulties. Some parents and adoption workers experience difficulty and frustration in explaining the complex nature of adoption-related trauma to educators. As conversations about trauma continue, attempts to demystify and simplify terminology used and to develop greater knowledge and understanding may give parents, carers and teachers greater confidence to communicate and work effectively around this complex issue.

5.4.7 Theme 7: Academic experiences

Meese (2005, p. 157) emphasised that adoptive parents feel frustrated when educators "do not know how to test or teach their children". The academic experiences of intercountry adoptees were discussed by all focus groups, most significantly, the need for accurate identification and diagnosis of learning needs and timely interventions. One group discussed the challenges inherent in identifying and supporting children with "invisible disabilities" (FG2_P2) and the need for better assessment processes for these children as they commence school. Language support and development in school was a high priority, with some recognition that support needs to be tailored to the varying degrees of language proficiency held by the child, particularly, but not exclusively, older intercountry adoptees. The concepts of second-first language acquisition (Glennen & Masters, 2002; Roberts, Krakow, & Pollock, 2003; Roberts et al., 2005) and "language switch" (Jean-Baptiste, 2012) were significant in this study.

Diagnosing learning needs

The term *diagnosis*, meaning to "distinguish or differentiate" (Kendell, 1975, p. 23) in order to "reduce uncertainty" (Achenbach, 1974; p. 568), historically reflects the medical model of psychological disorders, while *classification* is used more in education (Webber & Plotts, 2008, p. 9). Nevertheless, the terms *identify* and *diagnosis* were used by participants when highlighting the process of accurately determining the needs of these children at school.

Joanne, who adopted her daughter closer to school age, commented on teachers' inability to identify specific learning needs. Joanne described her daughter as "very bright", but also acknowledged that she had some learning difficulties. She said, "Convincing the schools that a) they existed and b) what to do about it, has been interesting" (FG3_P3). It was not until her daughter was in grade five (through her own research and teaching experience), that Joanne was able to confirm that her daughter had dyslexia. She expressed her frustration at school processes when she said, "And why haven't I been told that this kid can't read? And why haven't I been involved earlier? … Why didn't they say, 'Your kid's having trouble reading'? Like no one told us" (FG3_P3). When Penny asked, "How could they not pick that up?" (FG3_P6), Joanna replied, "Well, I suppose they just thought she was dumb or something, I don't know" (FG3_P3). It was evident by this conversation that parents

do expect teachers to be able to recognise learning difficulties associated with basic skill development (for example, literacy and numeracy), and to suggest appropriate and timely intervention strategies. Conversely, Samantha recognised that some difficulties may be beyond the school's area of expertise.

> We were sent through the rounds of paediatrician and psychologist and all that sort of stuff. … He's got about six different issues and so they keep calling him the cocktail child or the complex child …. But getting those diagnoses, he doesn't fit neatly into any category, because his emotional issues seem to trigger off these other things …. So, I think they find it difficult to deal with kids who don't fit (FG3_P2).

Parents who believe that their child's learning is impacted by their early life experiences may be reluctant to have their child "labelled" with a diagnosis that they believe is not completely accurate. For example, Terri said of her work with one particular family:

> … their child received a diagnosis … she was struggling in the school system and [with] learning. We all understood really that would have had more to do with her early life experiences, rather than the fact that she would probably have a diagnosis. They [the parents] were certainly very resistant to her having a label, but felt that that was the only way that they would be able to get her the additional support and funding within the school. So as resistant to her having a label that would perhaps sit with her for the duration of her school years, they also saw that that would be the only way to access some assistance (FG1_ASW1).

Parents Judy and Jenna agreed that "if they haven't got a label they don't get looked after" (FG2_P5) … [and] "they don't get the assistance required" (FG2_P3); however, Jenna's experience also highlighted the difficulty that parents may face when endeavouring to obtain support at their children's school. According to Jenna, her school's Guidance Officer worked across several schools, was "run off her feet" and consequently her son's wait for psychometric testing was 10 months. In the meantime, Jenna said she went "down other avenues … [and was] now feeding the school information to try and speed up the process". She stated that while schools have "safety nets" in place to attend to children, sometimes they "don't have the capability to do it" (FG2_P3).

Some parents choose to keep support services external to the school to protect their child from any perceived stigma associated with a label and to avoid their being singled out from their peers. Sharon, whose son was adopted at 3½ years of age, sought professional assistance (physiotherapist, occupational therapist, speech therapist) prior to starting him at school to help him with delayed speech and other adjustment issues. Once he started school, Sharon said:

> They told me with speech that they would be able to bring somebody in, one-on-one, just for speech at school …. I declined it. I just didn't want to segregate him into an area where here was someone constantly helping (FG2_P1).

Katrina described the process of liaising with various health professionals about the management of children who have experienced trauma as similar to piecing together a jigsaw. She said, "Even most of the Allied Health carers aren't all connected on knowing trauma and how to deal with trauma". She added that it was often difficult to "fit it all together so that it is a meaningful package [for schools]" (FG2_P4).

Margaret noted the need for both teachers and parents to receive more information and support when it comes to knowing what to "look out for" in children who were adopted from overseas (FG4_P3). A parent with one child, she believed that parents of several adoptees have more experience in this area. Leonie agreed, "Well, the first time through you have no idea" (FG4_P2). Margaret believed that the adoptive parents in her position, as well as teachers, need help with this difficult task of accurately diagnosing the children's learning needs and that a process should be put in place "when they come to school". She elaborated:

> They need to be on the lookout for the hearing, the colours, the sight, the language. … And they're not looking for those things because they're not sure what to look for. … There might be common themes between us all that they could be made aware of. … So, diagnosing again, rather than us guessing (FG4_P3).

Understanding language needs

The diagnosis of learning needs was a precursor to discussion about the specific identification and support of the precise language needs of intercountry adoptees and the ability of current language support programs in schools to meet

these needs. Participants agreed that when language needs of children from diverse cultural backgrounds are generalised, the unique needs of individual groups may be overlooked. Emily stated, "Refugee children who have come with their families … whilst they experience trauma, they don't have the added complexities in terms of cultural differences [within the family], learning English as a second language … but not having the family at home" (FG1_ASW2). Terri added her understanding of the limited exposure that some adoptees have had to their first language as a result of poor early life experiences.

> … especially for those children who have essentially been abandoned and perhaps only found at, you know, three or four years …. There is no explanation of their life history until that point and often they don't have a very good grasp of their language of origin because nobody has been unpacking that and teaching them their language. Even now, in a poorer, more rural area in some countries, families aren't going to be exploring that, more than just the necessities of communication in any case (FG1_ASW1).

Emily questioned the effectiveness of ESL classes in mainstream schools for adoptees who are withdrawn from classes and grouped together with children from immigrant families. She argued that a lack of funding in schools necessitates this grouping of students with a range of language needs. Confusion, however, was evident in the parent groups about language needs in general. Caitlyn, whose son was allocated to an ESL group in this way, did not believe he needed this program: "They put him into a class for ESL … but he's not ESL. We speak English at home, he speaks English at home. It's not as if we speak a foreign language at home and then he goes to school and has to speak English" (FG4_P1). However, other participants were concerned that while some children may appear to have very good conversational skills in various contexts, some parents have observed a lack of understanding and comprehension. Emily said:

> Kids learn what to say and what not to say, and what to repeat, but they don't necessarily know what it means. So, one of the children who had the most exceptional level of English I've seen from intercountry, because she was doing school in the Philippines in English, about three months into her place[ment] said, "What does 'understand' mean? What does 'concentrate' mean?" And they [the parents] went every night at dinner … "You need to concentrate" or "You need to understand" and because she's using the words

> and she's using them in context …. In the classroom kids might appear to be doing really well, but actually they're not understanding what they are saying. They are just repeating it (FG1_ASW2).

Leonie said that all of her children appeared to "pick up English really fast" and even "appear to be ahead of other children, verbally". She explained that it was not until she took two children out of the school system to home school them did she realise that they had only "a functional level of English" (FG4_P2). She gave an example where she asked her son if something was "due next Monday" and after "a very confused conversation" realised he didn't know what "due" meant (FG4_P2). She elaborated:

> I think it is something we need to be raising with all our teachers all of the time. Hey, this kid appears to know English, but they don't know English. I don't know how to get that across to them. I think it is across all of the adoptive kids. This one is a very subtle one [for] all of them that have not got English as their first language (FG4_P2).

Joanne also related that, when her first child came to Australia and started the prep year soon after, she coped quite well in a curriculum which was essentially "play-based". However, when her second child came and started school in grade one, "she couldn't understand 'sit down', 'turn to page 21', all that sort of thing …" even though both children were "so good at picking up cues from other kids". While her second child had started school in her birth country, and therefore was more equipped for school, Joanne was certain she still "didn't get it". Joanne explained that she spent a lot of time in the classroom as a parent helper providing assistance to her daughter as needed (FG3_P3).

Sharon, Jenna and Katrina also highlighted various language delays in their children. Sharon's son required a lot of speech therapy and three years later seems to be "catching up" (FG2_P1). Katrina said that even though "we met him two days after his first birthday, he still has language issues that we are working through ….You know, sounds. He's struggling" (FG2_P3). Jenna commented, "Teachers would sometimes say, 'I can't understand him'. Yeah, that was an issue" (FG2_P4).

Participants identified the added challenge for some adoptees when they are required to learn a third language at school as part of the general curriculum. Emily

believed that there is a "lack of flexibility" and inconsistencies across schools which make language learning difficult for some children more than others.

> We've had two different families contact [us] about their child being put into classes of learning a second [third] language when they're still learning English and they are also trying to promote that they retain their birth language. So to then put a third language on to them has been really distressing for children – just incredibly overwhelming – and the school just really downplaying it, saying, "There are only a few words here or there and we are only just learning about the culture rather than learning about the language." But for these children, it would be more beneficial, and some parents have said, in that period of time, "Can I come and take my child to the library and do some intense English learning with them or can they have additional ESL support during that period?" (FG1_ASW2).

Emily explained that in these two instances, one school accommodated requested alternatives for the child, while the other would not agree to any variation on the grounds that it would "make her look different" (FG1_ASW2). Once again, Emily emphasised the need for older adoptees to stay at home longer, not only for the necessary attachment work with families, but also to give them time to develop basic language skills (see Theme 4a – Initial transition to school). She argued that children who have basic language skills "are transitioning into a school much easier" (FG1_ASW2).

The development of language skills was an important consideration for focus groups, with apparent tension between time at home and starting school at an age/grade appropriate time. Individuals stressed the need for further information for parents and schools about "what to look for" in internationally adopted children, and a specific process for accurately ascertaining learning (including language) needs. Information and diagnosis/ascertainment close to the child commencing school would avoid delays which may further impede progress.

5.4.8 Theme 8: Behaviour

Much has been made of developmental issues including the impact of attachment difficulties and loss in the formative years of life (Ainsworth, et al.,1978; Bowlby, 1969, 1980), and for the adoptee, "attachment difficulties" and "developmental gaps" sometimes result in behaviours which reflect an emotional age

lower than chronological age (Lavery, 2013, pp. 7, 9; Becker-Weidman, 2009a). The issue of adoptees' behaviour within the social context of school was a vexed one and developing ways of working effectively with children with trauma histories, in particular, those who have experienced disorganised attachment was a significant issue for focus groups.

Anxiety-related behaviour

All groups identified the need for teachers to become more knowledgeable about anxiety-related behaviours and appropriate strategies for working with children who exhibit these behaviours. Emphasis was placed on understanding "distressed" or "anxious" children as opposed to "naughty", "defiant" or "attention-seeking" children (see Howard, 2013). Specific behaviours identified included attention-seeking behaviours such as "talking out of turn and wanting to be the cool kid" or being the "class clown" in order to make friends (Leanne, FG1_ASW5); unsafe behaviour such as children repeatedly running away from class or out of the school grounds (Penny, FG3_P6); sensory processing difficulties leading to a range of disruptive behaviours in the classroom or playground (Jenna, FG2_P3; Amanda, FG1_ASW7); and fear of rejection or abandonment (Kerry, FG3_P8; Samantha, FG3_P2).

Adoption workers agreed that a child who demonstrates anxiety-related behaviours at school is sometimes labelled an "attention problem [or] a defiance problem" (Terri, FG1_ASW1). Amanda argued that children who experience sensory-processing difficulties in the playground may do so due to "reduced close supervision", as well as the heightened "noise and activity". She explained that the confinement and structure of the classroom, the fear of being punished (for some children), and being able to "follow the rules with other kids" can sometimes keep behaviour in check in the classroom; while the opposite may occur in the playground (FG1_ASW7). However, Jenna said that her son's sensory difficulties are often "misconstrued as deliberately naughty" in the classroom because he has great difficulty sitting, listening, not fidgeting and learning in this environment (FG2_P3). She argued that schools are becoming more attuned to the observable traits of children on the autistic spectrum or with ADHD, and that some of her son's behaviours could easily be misunderstood as one of these conditions (see Gindis, 2008, for discussion of "autistic-like" behaviour).

> One particular son can't sit and learn. [He] would be happier sitting on the roof and watching from up there, or much more tactile, but can't. He learns in an entirely different way to the way the school system is set up, and that's hard. … OK, it goes probably down the line of sensory. … [He] doesn't have a diagnosis, doesn't have an aide there alongside [him]. They just keep getting kicked out of the class because they can't sit down and do their work … if your kid doesn't fit the system it seems pretty hopeless (FG2_P3).

Two other parents stated that their children's behaviours at school were an outcome of anxiety and were potentially unsafe. Penny described her distress at finding her son "missing" from school on three occasions without his teacher realising the problem. This, she said, necessitated her becoming a "helicopter parent":

> I live up the road from the school. Sometimes it's three times a day I'm called. His behaviour is shocking. He doesn't have an issue with me leaving because then he can run. He never stayed in the class. He ran. They'd find him, and he'd have friends with him that he'd dragged away with him. He'd be up a tree somewhere. He'd be in the toilet an hour into school. I'd happen to pop up, just because that's what I have to do (FG3_P6).

Samantha explained that her son's separation anxiety demonstrated during his kindergarten year continued to the middle of prep. She explained that whenever he had to be cared for by someone else it "really ramped up his abandonment fears. He [would] spend the whole day fearing that I wouldn't come back for him". Samantha's son had been diagnosed with a range of conditions over time:

> Extreme anxiety, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, some traits of ADHD, some traits of Aspergers and he has Turrets. But the ODD, he doesn't have ODD. His behaviours tick those boxes, but it's all about the anxiety. He is the most cooperative child if he is not anxious, regardless of what you ask him to do. It's his distress. He's not actually deliberately defiant (FG3_P2). ... [However], at the school we were at it was like he would scream, slam the doors and take off. The teacher would be on the phone, the Principal would be down from the office; catch him, take him to the room so he could calm down (FG3_P2).

Controversially, Monica voiced her opinion that when parents are anxious about school, there is a good chance that their children will be too. "School

experience isn't just the child's experience, it's the parents' experience as well, and anxiety is contagious" (FG3_P3). Samantha argued, however, that this is a common misconception that shifts blame to the parent rather than aiding in understanding the child's underlying needs (FG3_P2).

Anxiety is a normal pattern of behaviour which affects children in different ways as they grow. For example, childhood development theories typically identify children's first experience of "stranger anxiety" at around 7-8 months of age and "separation anxiety" at approximately 12-15 months old, but this is generally resolved by about two years of age (Huberty, 2010). For the adoptee, who did not develop consistent and trustworthy attachments in infancy, these anxieties may not have been resolved (Erikson, 1959). Also, the process of forming subsequent secure attachments to new parents may further exacerbate learned insecurities about separation in order to go to kindergarten or school. In the case of school-age adoptees who may have experienced various forms of punishment in a previous school or orphanage setting, learned compliance in institutional settings may occur, regressing once they are home. For some adoptees, school anxiety has resulted in a physiological response, further compounded by the way in which it is managed by school personnel. Emily described one such case where she visited the school in an attempt to support a child:

> One child needed to go to the toilet all the time, and there were paediatric investigations and it seemed to be more related to anxiety and emotions. It was happening at school all the time and the teacher wouldn't let the child go because they had to go in a buddy system, and then it was disrupting the class. And so, eventually this child wet themselves in class which was so embarrassing and then the regression. It's almost like that cycle. Rather than just letting her go when she needed to go and having a different buddy every time – it's grade one. Really if you are going to the toilet a lot during the day surely that's better than wetting yourself in class, being really embarrassed, regressing and not wanting to go to school.

Both Emily and Amanda agreed that the child's behaviour was interpreted by the school as "naughty behaviour that needs to be managed" (FG1_ASW7) and that the school's response in this situation showed a lack of willingness to understand the child's needs or to be flexible (FG1_ASW7; FG1_ASW2). Emily described her attempt to explain to the principal and teacher, based on a report from an

occupational therapist, the child's lack of sensory development. The report recommended that this child should be allowed to go to the toilet every time she needed to. According to Emily, at the conclusion of the meeting, the year one teacher asked the principal, "So do you think I should just let her go?" leaving the support workers astonished (FG1_ASW2). Terri added, "I agree, that a lot of professionals are missing anxiety and giving it a different label, whereas the actual core behaviour is anxiety. That's what's going on for this child" (FG1_ASW1).

Adoptive parents like Samantha, whose children experience behavioural difficulties at school, sometimes find it difficult to determine the purpose of the behaviours and whether or not some are simply developmentally appropriate. While only two parents expressed strong concerns about their child's safety at school (Penny, FG3_P6; Kerry, FG3_P8), many made connections between behaviour and anxiety. Samantha summed up this uncertainty:

> I don't know whether his challenges are - I know that they are definitely adoption-related - but whether he would be a challenging kid in any case, we don't know. But definitely when you take away the extreme anxiety, life flows much more smoothly (FG3_P2).

Behaviour management

Adoption and support professionals with a working knowledge of trauma-based relational intervention practices provided input into what they believe are appropriate and inappropriate behaviour management strategies for children who were adopted. They agreed that the commonly practised behaviour management strategies that work for children who have experienced a secure and safe beginning to life may not be effective or appropriate for children who have experienced trauma and loss. Amanda said:

> For me it's about shifting their way of interpreting children's behaviour in the school setting. It's just having that whole mind shift. Kids want to behave and they want to behave well. They want to have friends, they want to get on, and it doesn't serve them well if we interpret their behaviour as misbehaviour. It's just behaviour that they don't know what else to do with at that point, and both parents and teachers need to guide kids to the appropriate behaviour, not punish. And schools still have much more of a

> punishing type mentality about managing behaviour. … It's really difficult to have the education system understand that you need to manage these kids' behaviour differently [and] a lot of this behaviour is about anxiety that needs to be managed (FG1_ASW7).

Both professionals provided specific examples. Leanne said that for many of these children their behaviour is about "wanting to be accepted" and the practice of separating them to a "time out" corner or into another room by themselves may inadvertently add to their sense of rejection, insecurity, poor sense of belonging and self-worth (FG1_ASW5). Amanda explained that for some children a "star up on the board" is an insignificant goal in the big scheme of their lives and may not be valued (FG1_ASW7).

All focus groups commonly identified attention-seeking and anxiety-related behaviours including sensory processing difficulties as problematic for some adoptees at school. Adoption and support workers addressed the need for teachers to understand the purpose behind these types of behaviours and to respond accordingly. Howard (2013, p. 91) agrees, "It is vital that schools grow in the understanding of trauma and attachment-related issues and research-supported behaviour management approaches" and to view these children as "distressed and not merely deliberately defiant".

5.4.9 Theme 9: Communication

Good communication within an inclusive school community is derived necessarily from the collaboration and cooperation between school personnel, parents and students. Positive relationships are promoted when productive teams share life experiences, reach consensus, and work towards common goals (Keefe, 2006). Focus group participants sought to collaborate with administrators and teachers about adoption-related issues that were relevant to their children's needs in school. When communication was open and relationships were positive the children tended to experience more positive outcomes at school. Conversely, ineffective communication and poor relationships between parents, teachers and school leaders sometimes led to negative experiences for children and assumptions being made about teacher competence, school flexibility and capacity to cater for children from diverse backgrounds.

Relationships, communication and assumptions about teachers

Participants emphasised the importance of positive relationships and effective communication between adoptive parents and school personnel, where all parties were prepared to communicate about relevant adoption-related issues to better support the children (Penny, FG3_P6). Emily said, "Some have amazing relationships with teachers … and really appreciate the extra mile in terms of getting to know their particular child's needs" (FG1_ASW2). Amanda added that sometimes it helps when the parent is a teacher themselves (FG1_ASW7) as they have a greater understanding of school policies and processes. Leonie shared her experience and assumptions about teachers in terms of their methods of communication with parents. She said that teachers who are:

> progressive and desiring communication have no problems … the teachers that you want to communicate with are the teachers that you don't have problems with. There is a direct link. The ones that are easy to communicate with, all of a sudden all of the problems go away, and the ones that write the short, sharp …. So the ones that'll email are modern, progressive and want to have a dialogue. The ones that use a school diary, they're the ones you'll have trouble with (FG4_P2).

This assumption indicates that teachers who communicate via email to parents are more likely to do so regularly and expediently than those who use more traditional methods. Several parents agreed that when teachers are "caring enough" to be proactive and timely in their communication, parents are given forewarning of any potential challenges for the children and are able to contribute to a solution (Penny, FG3_P6; Kerry, FG3_P8, Joanne, FG3_P3, Samantha, FG3_P2). Leonie sympathised, however, with teachers of children whose parents have "way too much input", or who are overly confrontational about their child's needs. She said that parents should think about "how we raise things …"; avoid being "the squeaky wheel" or the "raging bull"; and "only complain when you really have something, and then choose your method" (FG4_P2).

It was clear that parents make various assumptions about teachers' competence as a result of their ability to communicate effectively. For example, Margaret described her son's "fabulous teacher" from the previous year who communicated regularly and constructively with all parents and this helped her when she needed to

address adoption-related issues that arose for her son. “She’d be there meeting the parents and emailing and [making] suggestions, extra work .... Nothing was too hard” (FG4_P3). Hearing this, Caitlyn said, “She loved her job” (FG4_P1), and Margaret replied, “Yes, and she was very good at it”. In contrast, Margaret said her son’s current teacher “hides over the other side of the classroom from everyone, won’t return emails, doesn’t talk to you, doesn’t want to know you” (FG4_P3).

Groups confirmed that good communication fosters positive relationships between parents, teachers and the school and is likely to lead to practices which are inclusive of all parents who wish to engage with teachers about their children. When adoptive parents have the opportunity to collaborate regularly and efficiently with teachers about adoption-related issues, relevant knowledge, information and concerns may be shared in the normal ebb and flow of good teaching practice.

Parents as advocates

While parents of children with various needs in school will advocate for their children to ensure the best possible outcomes, adoption and support workers said there is often a fervent need in adoptive parents to “feel that they can advocate for their child … from the whole bonding perspective and that sense of entitlement” to being “able to trust themselves and the knowledge of their child” (Amanda, FG1_ASW7). Parents generally agreed that they needed to advocate for their children on a number of levels, including sharing general information about adoption and relevant pre-adoption experiences which may impact on the child at school. Robyn, Jenna and Katrina, however, emphasised caution when providing general adoption information to teachers, their concern being that children may be stereotyped by non-specific information (FG2_P2; FG2_P3; FG2_P4). Robyn stressed the importance of thinking about what and how much information to communicate to teachers (FG2_P2).

According to Robyn, advocacy is “easier said than done” (FG2_P2), but is often attempted by parents at the beginning of a new school year, with new teachers and classes. Sharon said it is important to be “clear right from the beginning” by having early conversations with teachers about potential adoption-related issues (FG2_P1) and Carter explained, “It just triggers awareness in the teacher that, if anything sort of comes up, you know, we’ve already had the discussion and they’d have some awareness of what’s going on” (FG3_P7).

Emily stated that adoptive parents advocate for their children when there is evidence of "any regression or changes in behaviour at home that might not be evident at school" when they believe that school is having an impact on the behaviour (FG1_ASW2). In Penny's case, she felt inadequate to explain this to the teacher:

> For me personally … I'm confused myself as to what's going on. So I'm pointing all over the place, when really what I'm trying to search for is some key things that I can put in place that are black and white. Key things that we can then pass to the school [such as] these are the triggers, avoid these if you see these behaviours, don't kick him out, don't yell at him … get him to push a wall for five seconds. You know, just some key things (FG3_P6).

Penny and Monica agreed that regular two-way communication with teachers is needed to ensure consistency between home and school. In particular, they requested that teachers contact them if any positive experience or event occurs at school (see Theme 6: The teacher), or if problematic racial issues arise. Penny felt it was important for her to know what was going on at school, "in case it follows him home". She emphasised her expectation that racism is "stopped at the moment it's said. I don't want to know about it the next week" (FG3_P6). Carter added, "It's important that what [teachers] are doing in the classroom, we need to be doing at home, so that we are all on the same page … all on the same team" (FG3_P7).

The topic of parents advocating for their children highlighted a pervasive sense of frustration evident across all focus groups. This was most evident when participants spoke of teachers underestimating the knowledge that parents had developed about their children's needs. Amanda explained:

> A lot of our parents, by the time they've got to that stage, really know their children very well and there's very little respect for how much these parents actually know their kids and what their needs are. So from the education perspective there is often a diminishing of their knowledge of their own child which is very difficult for them, to feel that they can advocate adequately for their child. There is definitely the sense that parents get that, as teachers, they know best and that, "You don't actually know very much at all as a parent, and so just believe what we are telling you about what is going on in the classroom" (FG1_ASW7).

Parents supported this when Kerry and Caitlyn commented on the amount of reading that they do in an attempt to understand their children's needs. Kerry stated, "… [we] just spend hours reading everything we can get our hands on" (FG3_P8), and Caitlyn added, "I certainly wasn't trained. I've done so much reading" (FG4_P1).

Kerry's frustration extended to having insufficient time to meet with teachers during short parent interview meetings, finding it difficult to communicate in any significant way about complex concepts such as pre-adoption trauma (Kerry, FG3_P8). Armed with extensive reading material for the teacher about "attachment disruption trauma and early abandonment trauma, [and] post-institutionalisation", she commented on the outcome of a brief interview:

> [The teacher] went, "Thanks". And then about a week later, I tried to follow up and she went, "Oh yeah, it was good." Right – then just moved off. To be granted an hour-long meeting at the start of the year or the start of the term would have just been amazing for me. I was doing five minute grabs where I could with the teacher (FG3_P8).

Others parents had difficulty with the constant and ongoing need to educate the principal and new teachers each year, while organising outside health professionals to provide additional information to teachers (Jenna, FG2_P3). Leanne stated that adoptive parents she has supported were made to feel "over-reactive" and "not heard" after raising issues with teachers or the principal (FG1_ASW5). Katrina's frustration occurred when strategies she suggested would work with her son at school were not utilised (FG2_P4).

When communication between parent, teacher and/or school becomes strained, advocacy also becomes less productive. Monica found she was distancing herself from the teacher. "I just had to change tack a little bit, and make it really formal …" (FG3_P5). Caitlyn found the need to document every communication with both teacher and administration staff in order to keep a record of conversations, responses and follow-up. Caitlyn described the communication methods which ensued:

> Many of the situations, and there have been many, I have communicated in writing to the school and they refuse to respond. I ask them to respond. They refuse to. They say, "No, you come and meet with us and we'll talk to you, but we will not put anything in writing" and that's it (FG4_P1).

Margaret confirmed a similar experience with her child's school when she said "Mmmm, I'm getting the same now" (FG4_P3). It was evident that once negative communication becomes the norm, the best interests of the children may not be served. This study shows that when parent-teacher relationships are positive, when all parties acknowledge and encourage regular, respectful and timely communication, effective channels are established through which parents may advocate for their children's needs. This is relevant for all parents and children, including those with specific needs. When communication is strained or non-existent, positive school experiences may be undermined.

School leader openness and support

Respecting parents' knowledge of their children's needs and their right to advocate for these was not something considered solely the responsibility of the classroom teacher. The school leader's openness and support was seen as important by three groups. Debbie and Brett agreed that "the principal sets the tone of the school", and their children's principal demonstrates significant empathy and consideration of both intercountry adoptees and of cultural diversity generally, as a result of his personal experiences (FG4_P4; FG4_P5). Debbie said:

> At our school, the principal and their family spent ten years in a third world country. He adopted a child, and so they have been really able to relate to us and where we've come from with our children and they have been so supportive. The school is very open to different races. In our son's class there are two other African boys; in our daughter's class there's a half African child (FG4_P4).

Brett described this principal's child, a senior student at the school, as a "kind of superstar. Everybody loves this child. And that has set this tone over the whole school; that kids who come from diverse backgrounds - that's cool" (FG4_P5).

Leonie agreed that "tolerance" at her children's primary school "comes from the headmaster down" (FG4_P2). Positive primary school experiences were in contrast to her older children's negative secondary school experiences. She attributed some of this to the culture and tone set by the school principal. Robyn believed that "the leadership at the top has to be very supportive and very much aware …" (FG2_P2). Samantha appreciated the efforts of the principal at her son's school who met and communicated regularly with her to devise strategies to support

her son at school. She said that the principal "tried really hard"; however, in the end, the task became too difficult and the needs of the other children had to be prioritised.

> The principal was on board. I would have weekly meetings with the principal where we tried to work out strategies to deal with different things; they were willing to try all sorts of things with him. They even brought in a psychologist who was specialized in gifted twice exceptional children to try and work something out. They said how about we try part-time home schooling so the other children will get a chance to learn, all that sort of stuff, but [at] the time, they just didn't have the time to be dealing with him and getting the other kids to learn in the classroom (FG3_P2).

Caitlyn described the difficulties her son had at school (see Chapter 6, Case study 5: The Wilson Family) and determined that the problems were not with other children or the school community but with "the teachers, and it comes from the Head, definitely" (FG4_P1). Penny believed, however, that it takes a "full circle of care" or a "collaborative approach to support … teacher, admin, office staff, parents" (FG3_P6) to support adoptees who need it in school.

It is understood that each member of a school team will have their own perspectives which "may be entrenched in social, cultural and moral contexts**"** (Keefe, 2006, p. 199). Effective communication, facilitated by positive relationships, enables parents, teachers and school leaders to work respectfully together to support all children, and in particular, to face the additional challenge of working with children who have complex needs. Parents of these children are likely to advocate on their behalf and positive, open channels of communication will establish a context for this to occur. The school leaders have an influential role in fostering effective communication, productive partnerships, and a culture which seeks to embrace diversity.

5.4.10 Theme 10: Curriculum experiences

It is in the area of actual curriculum experiences that the dynamic impact of various developmental and environmental influences comes to the fore. While overseas research has indicated the difficulty that adoptees may have with many traditional curriculum tasks (Meese, 2002; Ng, 2006; Schoettle, 2003), the specific activity inherent in various topics within the Australian curriculum provides a telling insight into the issues at play. Curriculum experiences were identified as problematic

by all focus groups and included tasks around families, personal histories and timelines, and more specific to the Australian context, the Stolen Generation. Experiences were evaluated as positive when teachers were forward thinking, prepared to liaise with parents, and flexible in their approach to topics and activities. A number of participants, however, perceived school systems and the implementation of both curricular and extra-curricular activities to be inflexible, which was not necessarily conducive to positive development.

Inflexibility

Adoption and support workers argued that generally, the "school system" and the curriculum it delivers are inflexible when it comes to catering for children with complex needs. Terri argued that children are often categorised and assumptions are made which makes it difficult to cater for the individual child holistically.

> The struggle is with the school system, sort of almost needing that child to fit within the broader curriculum and not being able to tweak that curriculum to meet the child's needs, and that's quite difficult … they're a child with a different cultural background or a non-English speaking background, or they're a child from a different pre-adoption care experience, or they're a child who has experienced trauma, whereas they are actually a child who has experienced all of those things and many more. So they need a very specialized response, in my view. (FG1_ASW1).

Leanne added that accountability stakes in schools (for example, MySchool and NAPLAN results) place additional pressure on schools and teachers which does not leave "a lot of room, outside of what they have to do, for extras" (FG1_ASW5). Also, a number of parents used the analogy of "boxing kids in". Jenna stated that the school system "boxes our kids. If our kids don't fit in that system, then they flounder on the side and that's what we are experiencing now with one of our kids" (FG2_P3). Samantha said, "Some of them [our children] are just so outside the box" (FG3_P2).

Topics, activities and teacher support

Participants in all focus groups identified several topics in the Australian curriculum and some extra-curricular activities that have caused challenges for adoptees and their families. While some parents did not have difficulty managing these topics with their children, others found it sometimes upsetting. Key differences in the way in which teachers selected resources, delivered these units and

communicated with parents about them were evident. Several topics and approaches featured prominently in this regard.

Fairy tales (Foundation, English)

Kerry identified the choice and use of particular fairy tales in the English Foundation curriculum, where children were required to respond to and examine traditional literary texts (ACARA, 2013), as frightening for her daughter. She recalled that "*Hansel and Gretel* was the first introduction for my second child … an auditory book" which, she said, resulted in:

> nightmares [which] exacerbated every abandonment issue and separation anxiety issue that she experienced. Then she started having nightmares about witches. Because [in] *Hansel and Gretel* not only do the parents send them out the first time, when their children find their way home the parents send them out again (FG3_P8).

Kerry maintained that when she approached the teachers to discuss alternatives, the teachers were not prepared to be flexible, but argued that "it was the foundation of English". It was evident in the focus group that Kerry disagreed with the teachers' position on the selection and use of fairy tales and was very frustrated by their response.

Family histories and personal timelines (Foundation and Year 1, History)

The Foundation and Year 1 History units which focus on the study of family, personal histories and timelines was identified as "very difficult for children and very difficult in the home" when parents have to "unpack" and support their children with sometimes complex concepts (Terri, FG1_ASW1). Leanne had assisted parents in communicating with their children's school about the sensitivity of life development work and the study of family histories, particularly with young children in the early years of school. She argued that these topics may be difficult not only for adoptees but "for children in general" (FG1_ASW5).

Parents confirmed that when children were asked to bring in baby photos (that some did not have) or to identify significant events in each year of their life, children and parents needed time to consider the options and to discuss with the teacher how this might be handled. Generally, parents did not object to the tasks, but wanted to be

notified of these units in advance, so that they could support their child through them. Judy said:

> I'm not saying they shouldn't cover it, but to bring it up and to be doing it for a full week before they send it home? So I found out about it a week later, and that started explaining why the nightmares happened about four days before that, and they've been ongoing in many ways (FG2_P5).

For some families, particularly those who have access to birth family photos and background information which can complete the family history puzzle for their child, talking about the connections between birth and adoptive family may not be a problem, but may provide an opportunity for parents to talk with their children in meaningful and age-appropriate ways (Brodzinsky, 2006; Macrae, 2006). Some families focus on their current family when completing school projects, having deeper conversations about birth family at home. Nerida confirmed that this is her family's approach and that her child takes in items which reflect their current family context.

> I've just worked from the point of view that we are his parents. And so if they've asked for a picture of his parents or a discussion about it, well this is who we are. And we talk about it at home and if it comes up at school, I try to provide some insight or resources, but we're the family, we're it, for better or worse (FG3_P1).

For other children, particularly those with missing information, topics such as "family trees", "who am I?", "learning about me", or gathering historical facts about family may make these tasks more difficult (Penny, FG3_P6, Carter, FG3_P7). Penny and Carter recalled when their son was completing his family tree at school he was asked to bring in a photo of his father and mother. While some children may feel very comfortable bringing in a photo of their adoptive parents, others may feel conflicted. This was the case for Penny and Carter's son. Penny explained, "I just set him some magazines and said, 'Here, find a cool picture of someone with the same colour skin as you'" (FG3_P6). Carter added, "He took in a photo of Will Smith!" (FG3_P7). Carter described another task where his son was required to present information about an older member of the family. Carter explained, "Any time he's had to look back in the family, you know, he just gets a bit self-conscious. He's

feeling like I don't really know this, what do I do?" (FG3_P7). Penny described their general approach to these types of activities:

> We let him do what's comfortable. "We're happy, we are your family; let's look at great pop or nana". But sometimes he doesn't want to do that. He doesn't have the photos and the history … so we go with whatever he's thinking. Like we say to him, "I bet your dad had long legs and he could run as fast as you". You know, we get that imagination going in his head so that he imagines who his mum and dad look like … so if he wants to cut out pictures in magazines, go for it … and if he wants to think mum has the best afro, good on him. That's fine by me (FG3_P6).

Penny indicated that she wanted the difficult nature of these tasks for some children to be understood by teachers. Samantha had no problem with the tasks set, but elaborated on her son's internal struggle:

> Because he was torn, you know, because there's all those different options you've got for family trees, and you could do the roots and the leaves, you could do the circle, you could do all those sorts of things. All that's really good unless you've got a kid who's really conflicted about who he wants to put on his family tree, and who it's appropriate to put on his family tree, and who to reveal it to. He over-thinks absolutely everything, so that caused us problems (FG3_P2).

Various participants revealed that, when adoptees are asked to present personal information about family in front of the class such as in "show and tell" or oral presentations of autobiographies, there is no certainty about the outcome as each child will handle this differently. Some children, especially younger children, may need their parents to be present in the classroom for moral support or to help with difficult comments or questions from other children about adoption or their past. Others may not wish to talk in front of the class at all, while other children may feel confident talking on their own after clarifying the boundaries of the task. Katrina's example in the discussion of teacher attitudes showed that her little boy was confident with his mother present and proud to talk about his "three mothers" and "three fathers" (FG2_P4). Robyn also explained that through a task which required her son to investigate his ancestry, her son "worked out he had 17 brothers and sisters" which he dealt with positively (FG2_P2).

Leonie described her initial anxious reaction when her son had to complete a timeline task in grade one, indicating his key milestones from each year aged one to five. While her comments may highlight the conflict faced by other parents, they also reflect how the experience gained from supporting several children through these activities has changed her perspective. She indicated that she now believes that positive outcomes can result for the child with the right approach.

> I started to freak out and went, "No, no, no, breathe, he's OK about it, this is me". So I wrote to the teacher and I said that I'm sure you're very aware that children of diverse backgrounds, you know … foster and adopt, etc… and she said, "Yes, thank you, I was aware. I was going to monitor, but I'll provide feedback." Turned out [my son] had the most interesting and fascinating one to five years because we are very lucky, and [he said], "When I was with AB, and when I was with Grandma" … so it actually turned into a positive. I know we adoptive parents go, "Ahhhh", but I think if it is handled in a positive way; [our son] came out with everybody cheering and they were thinking he was marvellous (FG4_P2).

It was noted that teachers who are empathetic and supportive towards children with diverse and sometimes complex family and personal histories will understand the need to be flexible in allowing children to respond to these tasks in a variety of ways according to their individual needs and personalities. While some adoptive parents may feel apprehensive about the teacher's ability to understand and adequately support their child during these activities in the classroom, some advanced planning and open communication between parent and teacher should enable the child to experience the best possible outcome from the activity.

Autobiographies (English, Year 7)

Similarly, several parents commented on being concerned about their children being required to write their autobiography or memoirs in English. While the Australian Curriculum only explicitly mandates the use of autobiographies in Year 7 English, parents indicated that their children were required to complete variations on this task in Years 4, 6 and 8. Robyn explained that she was "a bit nervous" when she discovered that her daughters in Year 4 were both required to present an autobiography in oral form in front of the class, covering "from the day you were born right through to now" (FG2_P2). She decided not to intervene in any way but to see how they handled the task themselves.

> They handled it really well … I just let them work on it – write it themselves, and it was really interesting actually, how both of them presented it so completely different. One talked about her greatest joy is being a twin and she has been with her sister from the day they were born, and she is her best friend in the whole world. And it was just really beautiful. And then the other talked a lot about birth family, about you know, how "our mummy couldn't look after us, yet we go back and see her all the time, and I'm so lucky I've got two families" (FG2_P2).

This example highlights how two children the same age with identical backgrounds and similar experiences may address the task from very different perspectives. Therefore, equally, it would be difficult to predict a "one approach fits all" when supporting these children with this type of activity. As previously mentioned, a child's personality may also determine the emotional significance a task may have on them at different stages of development. Robyn added that her daughter who discussed birth family in her autobiography then jumped straight to, "And I hope to get a pony next year". Robyn reflected on her initial concerns:

> So for me it was that whole struggle about … do you let them share that much in front of everybody? Do you sort of say, "Oh, maybe don't tell them so much", but then not wanting them to feel that it's a secret and they should be embarrassed by it (FG2_P2).

Robyn's example shows that adults may sometimes be more concerned about potential challenges in the curriculum than the children themselves. Some children may value and benefit from talking through these topics with a trusted adult prior to and during the completion of tasks. Others may be perfectly happy to go their own way in a safe and supportive environment.

Grandparents Day

One group in particular focused on the difficulties they associated with the celebration of "Grandparents Day", which was identified by a number of parents as a potential problem not only for adoptees but for all children who no longer have grandparents. While Margaret explained that her son's school has a "Grandparents or Special Person Day" (FG4_P3), it was clear that this group of adoptive parents had given consideration to the best way to approach this event with their children. Leonie believed that this event "is quite emotive for a lot of kids" and so she generally takes

both grandparents "because kids from white backgrounds don't have grandparents [too] and so they get to share them" (FG4_P2). Brett said that he had attended himself with his children, while Margaret said, "I don't let him go. I took him to Dreamworld for the day" (FG4_P3). An emotional Caitlyn recalled her son saying to her the night before the event, "I just wish I had a Grandparent", that he did not need her to go but would go alone, and that "he just went to the library and played on the computer for the day" (FG3_P1). Leonie and Margaret agreed that Grandparents Day is one extra-curricular event which may be "outdated", and should be revised to be more inclusive of a variety of family contexts. Leonie suggested having an "Elderly People Day", inviting local retirees to participate to ensure all children have someone to talk to on the day (FG4_P2).

No doubt, children who have grandparents and grandparents who like to participate in such an event would value Grandparents Day. Also, it could be argued, not all Grandparents are necessarily "elderly". The suggestion was made, however, to include other "special people" and elderly community members to give all children the opportunity to fully participate in this celebration day, regardless of family members' availability. Further consideration of more inclusive approaches to family involvement in school may be warranted for children from diverse family backgrounds or in alternative care arrangements.

Immigration, refugees and intercountry adoptees

Leonie identified occasions when her children have experienced a level of expectation from both teachers and classmates about their degree of experience, knowledge and understanding about immigration issues, in particular, refugees to this country. She explained that when these topics are addressed in class:

> The whole class turns, the teacher turns, like they are supposed to have some special knowledge about this subject. Just like you and I don't, simply because we have adopted children, we don't necessarily have any answers on this very complex, distressing subject. So that's, I think those things just need to be handled more appropriately, and that teachers need to realise that being adopted is not the same as being a refugee (FG4_P2).

Parents generally agreed that teachers' willingness to liaise with them on potentially challenging topics and activities falls under the umbrella of "positive teacher support" (Katrina, FG2_P4) and should be an integral part of teacher training

(Judy, FG2_P5). Parent-provided examples revealed that some teachers do this well, while others may not consider this step essential to the planning process. Judy, a teacher, stated that "teacher awareness, curriculum-wise" is essential and should include the practice of teachers providing parents with "a list of the projects that the children are doing for the year … specifically for any parent concerns about whether the child would be at risk during those projects" (FG2_P5). This was considered a proactive measure which would ensure that communication with the teacher could occur in a timely fashion (FG2_P4; FG2_P5). Parents unanimously supported this type of approach and some had experienced it. Above all, it was affirmed that when parents provide teachers with relevant background information about their children and teachers provide opportunities to communicate and are receptive to parents' concerns, productive partnerships should ensure positive opportunities for the children to engage in meaningful ways through the range of curricular and co-curricular activities at school.

5.4.11 Theme 11: Social and emotional experiences

The social environment of school highlights the importance of friendships to all children. For children who have experienced institutionalisation in their first few years of life, the role of relationships is critical. Previous social relationship with other children in their birth country may impact on their ability to make friends at school (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006). Children whose family members are obviously physically different from one another may strive to "fit in" while also coping with feelings of being "different". One parent articulated her view of the impact of family difference on these children as, "It's not easy being green" (Leonie, FG4_P2). Comments and questions from other children at school about adoption and family difference are often challenging for children, especially in the early years of school (Meese, 2002; Schoettle, 2003). Participants identified the importance of establishing and maintaining cultural connections through adoption and other cultural groups.

"Fitting in"

Some parents shared that their children "fit in really well" (Joanne, FG3_P3), and "make friends really easily" (Carter, FG3_P7). In other instances, parents reported social difficulties at school for their children from various cultural backgrounds. Julie said that parents contact her more often when seeking advice on social issues rather than academic concerns. She said, "Fitting in at school, [and]

making friends in a new high school setting ... seems to be what parents are more concerned about" (FG1_ASW6). Joanne said that "being socially accepted [and] not standing out as different" is very important to her two children (FG3_P3). Judy agreed, "Mmm, [they] don't want to be different" (FG2_P5).

Adoption and support workers explained why some children may have difficulty forming same-age friendships with other children and may need flexible approaches, time and support to adapt to appropriate social roles in school. Emily's work with one family indicated that their child always gravitated towards older children in a playground because he did not know how to initiate play and older children did that for him (FG1_ASW2). Amanda added that this can sometimes cause problems in schools when children are not permitted to play with younger or older children. She explained why children often do this:

> It's where they feel most comfortable; so it might be a role that they have played in their family of origin to start with. So maybe they have always been the older sibling or maybe they've always been the younger one if they've come from foster families ... or, just relationships that were played out in institutional settings. So it's their way of managing their anxiety basically, because it is too unfamiliar to be making a relationship with someone [their] own age (FGl_ASW7).

A number of social difficulties were identified by parents. For example, Kerry recalled that her daughter "was the child that was walking around by herself with no friends, or being picked on and tormented" (FG3_P8; see Theme 9: Racial and cultural experiences). Other studies (see Scarvelis, Crisp & Goldingay, 2014) provide further evidence of the consequence of poor language skill when initially making friends. Sharon said that her son's speech delay hampered him in making new friends when he began school, as the other children simply "didn't have the patience" when he tried to communicate with them (FG2_P1). Amanda argued that "skin colour comes in again" as an issue in adolescent relationships (FGl_ASW7). Penny felt that children who experienced behavioural difficulties (see Theme 8: Behaviour) may be labelled as "the naughty kid ... [and] no one plays with you; parents don't have you around ... it becomes huge" (FG3_P6). Monica and Samantha agreed that "perceived rejection" by peers "can actually be a very tender point for these children" (FG3_P5), "which just seems to hit deeper; like getting poked right in the heart" (FG3_P2).

Other parents, however, argued that this could very well be just “a girl thing” (Nerida, FG3_P1), with girls being more sensitive than boys who will just “go and play with someone else” (Penny, FG3_P6).

Parents of children who were currently in upper primary school said that their children's experience of being in the one school for a number of years meant that “the adoption thing doesn't seem to be an issue” because of friendships that have developed over several years (FG3_P3). Leonie argued, however, that adoptees who are not academically inclined may ask themselves, “Where do I fit in this big group of people?” and may, like her son, “go into the refuge of sport. … It's great if you're good at sport. But you've got to find that identity” (FG4 P2). Scarvelis et al., (2014) confirmed that adoptee’s confidence is improved when they excel in a particular subject such as art or sport, and they are more readily accepted by others.

Comments and questions

Three groups highlighted the difficulty adoptees often have in responding to comments and questions generally made by other children, typically about their adoption experience (see Schoettle, 2003; also Chapter 2: Adoption-sensitive language). Parents commented on the value they place on “giving them the language” and the “confidence to be able to speak on behalf of themselves” (Joanne, FG3_P3). Sharon added, “The comments are the biggest thing I think” (FG2_P1). She explained that before her son started school this was not really an issue, but once at school, there were "a lot of questions" (FG2_Pl). She said she was glad that her family participated in the W.I.S.E. Up program which aims to empower children and their parents with strategies for responding to difficult comments and questions. When asked how her son now handles this problem, Sharon said, “Yeah, great, good” (FG2_P1).

Parents acknowledged that questions from others generally come from a natural curiosity about the unknown. Some parents chose a proactive approach to allay curiosity and circumvent difficult questions at school and this was welcomed by teachers. Emily described an activity sometimes initiated by parent or child where together they give a presentation to the class about adoption and the child's birth culture, generally done in the lower grades.

> For a young child, that's been a really good way of stopping all the questions because they found very early on people were saying ... "Who's your real

> mum? Who's your real dad?" and so that was a way of getting in every year before those questions started around this is our family, this is our culture and it's been really positive for them (FGI_ASW2).

Another parent, Jenna, argued that for one of her children the inquisitive comments and questions of other children conflicted with how he was dealing with his own adoption experience. She explained that other children would constantly ask him, "Are you adopted?"

> [There were] constant questions every day and then other kids all-round the school would come up and say it again, and so for him, he's got so flustered he didn't know how to answer. He just wanted to say, "Shut up and go away, it's none of your business!" While it was quite hard to determine whether kids are just curious or whether the kids were using it as a teasing aspect or what ... there was no real maliciousness there, but it totally undermined him (FG2_P3).

As a result, Jenna explained, her son did not cope at school or at home and was unable to concentrate on his school work: "It totally threw him off" (FG2_P3). In contrast, Carter described his son as "confident" and someone who "can deal with all the questions around adoption" such as, "Why are your mum and dad a different colour to you?" He explained that his son's general response is to "make fun out of whoever's asked him the question". Coming from interstate, Carter said his son often has fun with well-meaning elderly people at shopping centres who ask him where he is from. "Instead of saying, 'I'm from Africa', he'll respond, "I'm from Sydney'" (FG3_P7).

Children such as Carter's son have the personality and temperament to be able to handle problematic comments and questions from others. It is understandable, however, why many parents raised this as an issue for their children as they too often experience the curiosity of others alongside their children. Penny said that she has found other parents at school to be very challenging with questions such as, "How much did he cost? Where's his parents? How did you get him? Where did you buy him from?" She said, "Country crowds, [in particular] are hard going" (FG3_P7). Other parents gave further examples of questions they have been asked, such as, "Gee, isn't it a shame his birth mother didn't want him? (Samantha, FG3_P2) or "Did you pick him out of a catalogue?" (Penny, FG3_P6). Monica surmised, "They think

that because the child is different, because they are obviously not yours [biologically], somehow it gives them the right to ask anything at all" (FG3_P5).

While such comments and questions about ethnic differences may arise from natural curiosity or childish teasing, their impact is significant on many adoptees who are constantly and discomfortingly confronted by them. In a not dissimilar way, a lack of cultural awareness or sensitivity can also have significant disturbing effects if not managed appropriately, as this too may serve not simply to inform the inquirer, but also to underline the "difference" experienced by the adoptee. Consequently, the issue of developing and maintaining positive cultural connections as a part of facilitating a healthy personal identity for adoptees took on significance.

Cultural connections

Cultural connections for intercountry adoptees may help to support children both inside and outside of school (see Theme 12 - Racial and cultural experiences). While a direct question about cultural connections was not asked of the focus groups, three participants commented on the importance of establishing and maintaining cultural connections with other adoptees outside of school in order to build children's sense of belonging and self-confidence. Leanne commented on the value of adoptive families being a part of an adoption support group. She emphasised the need for these children to "interact with other children who share the same culture" and when families move location, or choose schools (see Theme 5: Type and selection of school), consideration is often given to "re-establishing connections" for their family and, in particular, the children (FG1_ASW5).

Robyn ardently advocated for adoptees to be a part of such peer support networks. She argued that when they establish this strong friendship base, "That's half the battle" (FG2_P2). Robyn said, "You know, they want to have friends, they want to be liked, they want to feel they have a level of popularity to some extent", and when parents participate in cultural events such as support group camps and picnics with their children, "they rebuild those connections, they have a sense of belonging, they have a sense of 'this is my story, but that's OK, 'cause this is everyone's story'" (FG2_P2).

Social acceptance is important for most children, but for the inter-country adoptee, there are added dimensions to the notion of "fitting in" which include

cultural and familial difference. Many adoptees make friends easily while others may not, particularly if pre-adoption experiences or language difficulties hamper appropriate social development. This study confirms that some children may require a flexible approach and additional guidance around building relationships with their chronological-age peers. While comments and questions from others are often simply the outcome of curiosity, when school personnel are sensitive to this issue, they may be able to offer assistance by promoting a culture of tolerance and respect for diversity within the school community, as well as being available to offer children personal assistance if needed. Cultural connections outside of school may also enhance these children's self-confidence and sense of belonging.

5.4.12 Theme 12: Racial and cultural experiences

The terms "race" and "culture" were defined in Chapter one, the key difference being that "race" is often used to classify people according to various characteristics such as nationality and physical features, while "culture" is more socially acquired consisting of, for example, traditions, behaviours and beliefs (Hays, 2008). The racial and cultural experiences of intercountry adoptees in school were discussed extensively across the focus groups (see Table 5.2); however, these terms were often used interchangeably by participants. For example, the term "cultural diversity" was sometimes used to explain the racial composition of a school rather than customs and traditions maintained from children's various countries of origin. Furthermore, consideration of "race" tended to focus more on issues of "racism" as opposed to the racial diversity of the student population. Confusion in terminology is understandable, as concepts such as these are complex and multidimensional (Bhopal, 2004).

Banks and Banks (2010) view the school as a "social system" which requires the total reformation of many aspects of school culture in order to promote "positive attitudes toward diverse cultural groups" (p. 24). Focus group data, however, indicated that Australian schools use inconsistent approaches ranging from celebrating to minimising difference or treating all children the same. The racial diversity of a school was considered important for some adoptive families when selecting schools for their children. Generalisations, assumptions and stereotypes were discussed in relation to culture and race, as well as misunderstandings about the differences between the experiences of children who were adopted and those who are

refugees. Three groups commented on issues of bullying, racism and the teacher's or school's response.

Cultural diversity of schools: Accommodating difference

Adoption and support workers believed that location (rural versus metropolitan) and school and classroom racial/cultural composition make a difference for children who were adopted from overseas. In rural areas of Queensland, the intercountry adoptee may be the only child who appears to be of a different cultural background to other children in their class (FGl_ASW1). Emily said, "Parents have reported that their kids have gravitated towards other cultural backgrounds if they've been in their classroom" (FG1_ASW2). Parents themselves suggested one reason for this may be that when children are in "fairly racially diverse" schools and classrooms, "they don't stand out too much" (Joanne, FG3_P3).

Parents provided examples which highlighted a varied approach to managing cultural diversity in Australian schools and this largely reflected the cultural composition of the school and local community. Robyn and Sharon agreed that their children's school has "a high Asian population" due to a Korean-based company which operates in the local community. Robyn found this "works really well" for her children by providing a greater cultural mix in the school. She said that her school has a "cross-cultural day where they all come in their costumes, and they do different international feasts" (FG2_P2). Also, when the school wanted to expand its language program, she was approached and asked by the administration team, "What do you think if we brought Mandarin in? What languages do you think we should target?" (FG2_P2). Brett said there are "lots of different races of kids in the school" which his children attend, including adoptees and exchange students. As a result, he added, "There's just a general acceptance" (FG4_P5). Debbie agreed that this particular school is "very open" then qualified, "But not everybody gets it still - the teachers" (FG4_P4). Jenna explained that while her children's current school was "very multicultural ... they've got kids from all over the place ... everybody sort of blends in, there's no big issue", still, "there is not [a] celebration of different cultures" (FG2_P3). Katrina added, "I think that all the private schools in [the local area] do lots of that sort of stuff with cultural days, but I don't think any of the state schools do" (FG2_P4), and Sharon qualified, "Or not so much" (FG2_P1).

Adoption and support workers identified ways in which some families attempt to help teachers integrate their children's birth culture into the classroom and to foster pride in their children. Some families meet with the teachers individually or collectively; some conduct information talks to their children's class about their birth country; others provide books for school libraries. Emily gave an example:

> We had a family that, every year within the first week, they'd go in and they'd have a celebration of the child's culture. They do a presentation about all the great things about the culture. They give some food. He gets dressed up, they get dressed up, and then by the end of it the kids are like "Wow, you're so awesome because you're from ... and they really put an emphasis on, you're amazing, you're really special and this is something to be celebrated and to be excited about. Now they're really proud because everybody wants to be his friend (FG1_ASW2).

Some children may ask to change their name at school "to a very simple name that can't be misinterpreted [or] mispronounced" (Leanne, FGl_ASW5). Others may select a well-known "cartoon name" that is readily recognised if they feel they are "not fitting in" with their own name (Emily, FGl_ASW2).

Renee said, "I didn't realise how white Australia was until we got these children. Our suburb's white, our school's white, we are so white" (FG3_P4). In contrast, Nerida explained that her son's prep teacher, an Indigenous Australian, talked to the children about "brown skin" people and supported the children well in NAIDOC (National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee) week activities. This teacher seized other opportunities to teach the children about diversity and tolerance. For example, when children teased a child by saying, "Oh, you've got funny things in your lunch box", the teacher turned this into an activity, communicated to parents, and invited children to bring in their own cultural foods eaten at home for the children to learn about and to share. According to Nerida, her son's lack of enthusiasm about taking "Injera" (African flat bread) to school soon turned into excitement when he reported later, "Some kids had two, mum!" (FG3_P1). It was generally agreed by parents that normalising difference in this way was a positive approach when applied by teachers to address issues of cultural diversity. It was also apparent that when teachers "invite student lives into the

classroom" in supportive ways, children are more likely to feel "significant and cared about" (Christensen, 2013).

There was general consensus amongst parents that "Global Education" should have a greater emphasis in schools, taking the focus away from individual children (Jenna, FG2_P3; Samantha, FG3_P2) while opening up "the broader world to all kids" (Robyn, FG2_P2). Joanne also believed that schools should be more proactive in providing resource materials which represent the cultural backgrounds of all the children in the school, including adoptees.

> I think it's sad that the schools don't take the initiative, like in the library there's no books on Africa. So at what point do I have to provide those? I know that [a friend] said that she bought them for her school and things like that. I mean, I don't even know if they research different countries but they don't have books on Africa in our school (FG3_P3).

Several parents argued that while raising some awareness, discrete cultural events or celebration days in schools may actually make children in minority groups stand out as different and adoptees in particular, who may not have a deep understanding of their birth culture, may feel uncomfortable or confused by these events. Margaret and Caitlyn agreed that their children do not like being "singled out" through special events (FG4_P5; FG4_P1), and Jenna and Caitlyn explained that their sons identified as Australians and just wanted to "blend" (FG4_P1). Jenna commented that her son has said to her, "I'm Australian. That's who I am. Just let me be who I am". Samantha added:

> It's a point of difference for them and sometimes that's just not what they want …. There was Chinese New Year stuff and I offered to bring some of his smaller outfits and things like that but he didn't want to - that really identified too closely with him. So, I provided decorations and things like that and information, but he didn't actually want to be pointed out (FG3_P2).

Robyn emphasised the importance of developing deeper cross-cultural understanding through the curriculum and by enhancing teacher understanding through training and professional development, rather than through isolated events which may be only token gestures. She said, "When it comes to looking at our History curriculum sometimes I'm a bit ashamed. We're very white middle class in the way we discuss other cultures and historic events" (FG2_P2).

Caitlyn provided an example where her son's class was studying Africa, its people and culture. When her son was able to share about the area he came from, she said, "He really got into it .... But he wasn't actually singled out, that was what the class was doing. It was a big picture and he was part of that picture" (FG3_P1). Leonie commented that herein lies a "really subtle line" that teachers need to walk when studying the children's countries of origin, to avoid making assumptions about the children's knowledge and experience (FG4_P2) or singling them out in front of their peers (Margaret, FG4_P3). Caitlyn argued for more targeted teacher training when she said, "It just all boils down to training. I just don't think they're trained" (FG4_P 1).

The cultural composition of the student population of a school will no doubt affect the degree to which schools embrace the notion of a multicultural education. By addressing issues of cultural diversity in a more holistic way, through school policy and processes, by addressing staff perceptions and attitudes, and by making space in the curriculum to normalise cultural difference (Banks & Banks, 2010), schools may move beyond the celebration of "heroes and holidays" to allow all children from different cultural backgrounds, including intercountry adoptees, to feel important and cared for (Lee, Menkart & Okazawa-Rey, 2002).

Bullying and racism

Children from diverse cultural backgrounds do experience race-based discrimination in Australian schools (Greco, Priest & Paradies, 2010), and when "difference" results in bullying, children's psychosocial well-being may be affected (Correa-Velez, Gifford, & Barnett, 2010). This study shows that children adopted from overseas, even those who have been living with white families from a very young age, may also experience bullying and racial discrimination, most commonly by other children in the playground, but sometimes, inadvertently, by teachers.

Kerry blamed a "lack of scaffolding in the playground" for a bullying incident which involved her daughter at school. Halted by emotion as she recalled the incident, she described how her child was constantly "walking around by herself with no friends, or being picked on and tormented", and then one day:

> her hands were tied together and she was ... um ... told she was going to be pushed into a sandpit ... sorry ... and they were going to bury her. The teachers denied that it even happened, even though it was a teacher who

> untied her hands. And because of her semantic-pragmatic disorder (taking things literally) she didn't understand that that was not in fact going to happen, so she .... (trails off) (FG3_P8)

A family friend completed this story by explaining that this young girl would sometimes confuse reality with imagination and a suggestion made in a teasing fashion (in addition to having her hands bound) was taken very seriously by the child. As a result of this tendency, however, "the teachers would discount anything that she said" (Samantha, FG3_P2). According to her mother, the fear the threat evoked affected her daughter for a long time to come (Kerry, FG3_P8).

Leanne explained that bullying in relation to "the colour of the child's skin" is an issue that some parents report. For example, she described a playground incident where a child was sharing food with a number of other children, but would not give any to the "brown boy". The parents became aware of the incident several weeks later when the boy was drawing pictures and revealed the event (FGI_ASW5).

Parents acknowledged that racism occurs in Australian schools "despite what we all like to think" (Leonie, FG4_P2). While covert bullying is generally difficult for parents or teachers to detect, it can increase the victim's social isolation at school (Le Bon & Boddy, 2010). Leonie accepted that children sometimes behaved this way; however, she found it more disturbing when insensitive remarks were made to children by adults at school. Several parents empathised with the experiences of non-adopted immigrant children as well as their own children's experience. Leonie commented on a teacher's aide assigned to her son's class who made "inappropriate comments to many children including referring to my boy's brown eyes in a negative way, and calling his burn victim, white best friend a 'burnt cookie'"(FG4_P2).

Other parents identified instances of racial bullying by other children in their children's schools. Monica said her Indian friend's daughter was told "she was ugly because she had dark skin" (FG3_P5). Caitlyn's son experienced repeated bullying when he was in Year 1. "My son had a child coming down from a higher grade, racially vilifying him, and the final straw was putting him in a rubbish bin because 'that's where blacks belong'" (FG4_Pl). While this comment is confronting, it does serve to explain the sense of helplessness and frustration expressed by a number of participants. Even Brett, who previously commented on the high level of tolerance

and acceptance in his children's school, found that more subtle racism occurs that frequently upsets his son (FG4_P4).

Parents varied in terms of their feelings of satisfaction regarding how the school responded to issues of bullying and racism. Carter stated, "Generally, if there's been an issue, if we tell the school, and this has been wherever we've lived, the schools jump on it really hard and quickly. It's been good. I've always been happy with the response from the school" (FG3_P7). Leonie agreed, "Generally, it's been good … generally we've had good empathy and pretty good understanding" (FG4_P2). In contrast, Caitlyn's communication with the school about her son being bullied was not as productive.

> There were five incidents over five days, and I went to the Head Master and said I want something done about this immediately, and each time I was given the promise that it would be done, and each time it happened again the next day. And the rubbish bin was the final straw where I threatened with legal action unless something was done with this child. So the child was removed from the school. The child's parent was a teacher at the school and that's why it took so long (FG4-P1).

Caitlyn and Margaret both stated that their sons were discriminated against by teachers who treated them differently to other children. Caitlyn said that her son was "constantly being targeted" in subtle ways in the classroom which her son picked up on. Similarly, Margaret was adamant that her son's current teacher discriminated on the basis of race, sending him repeatedly to the office for minor incidents while other children did not receive the same consequence (FG4_P3). Instances such as these are very disconcerting for parents; however, Leonie acknowledged the influence which her own assumptions and sensitivities may have on her judgements:

> I could see that she didn't respond in the same way to [my] child. It was very subtle but my daughter never noticed ... [perhaps] we're picking it up more, looking for it. Some of us are just rolling through it. She didn't pick it up [my daughter]. Or maybe I was being oversensitive (FG4_P2).

Stereotypes, assumptions and generalisations

In addition to such perceived racial discrimination, parents shared instances where racial stereotypes and assumptions are perpetuated in schools. For example, Renee argued that dark-skinned children need to work harder to receive academic

recognition, more so than white-skinned children. She recalled an incident with her daughter involving a casual encounter with a well-intentioned teacher. On learning that the child was from Africa the teacher informed her of the availability of English language support classes, until she discovered that the girl generally achieved As. It was not the offer of support classes that was thought to be offensive but the assumption that "black children" need help (FG3_P4).

Routinely, some adoptees experience the assumptions and stereotypes that immigrant children may also experience. For example, Robyn said that other children who did not know her son's name used to call him "Jackie Chan" which upset him at first (FG2_P2). Penny commented that because there are two other African children in her children's school, it is often assumed that they are all brothers and sisters due to having the same coloured skin (FG3_P6). Leanne noted that the experience of intercountry adoptees is often generalised to that of refugees and children in foster care through a lack of knowledge and understanding (See Theme 6: The Teacher). However, Leonie stated, "My girls have had an absolute gutful" of being made the "token refugee" when discussions turn to issues about refugees in Australia. She explained that while her girls have empathy for people who have come from their birth country, they are not refugees and do not think of themselves as refugees: "I think those things just need to be handled more appropriately, and that teachers need to realise that being adopted is not the same as being a refugee" (FG4_P2).

Leonie added that sometimes generalisations have had unexpected outcomes for her children in that they have expressed a desire to disassociate themselves from a pervasive stereotype. She noted that "the behaviour of the black children at the school was horrendous" and because this group became identified in this way her girls were "a minority within a minority"' because they were well behaved. She said, "One of my girls was saying to me, 'The kid that looks the most like me is the worst behaved kid in the class ... I don't want to look like this because he looks like this'" (FG4_P2).

This study confirms that the racial and cultural composition of local community and school impacts on the experience of intercountry adoptees. Participants believed that schools embrace cultural diversity in varying degrees; however, adoptive parents had mixed opinions about the value of isolated, discrete celebration days which may actually be difficult for some children. Overall, parents

were concerned about the racial discrimination and bullying of all children from diverse cultural backgrounds and argued that there is a need for further education and empathy for the different groups in Australian schools today. Participants also believed that common stereotypes, assumptions and generalisations are prevalent in schools, and some argued that more meaningful approaches to Global Education would help to reduce this, fostering greater sensitivity and tolerance in classrooms and playgrounds in this country.

5.4.13 Theme 13: Post-adoption support

In Australia, post-adoption support is available to parties impacted by adoption, including "people who have been adopted, parents, siblings and partners" through counselling, support and the provision of information (Benevolent Society, 2016). There are also on-line modules available for teachers to help them develop strategies for working with children who have experienced abuse-related trauma (ACF, 2009), and an information booklet for educators of children adopted from overseas (PASS, 2013). According to adoption and support workers, however, the type of support most often accessed by adoptive families includes counselling for parents and children, parenting workshops, and advocacy and information for teachers in schools. Despite the availability of information booklets and on-line resources, three groups stressed the importance of providing information and support to teachers of adoptees. Two groups suggested that a team approach is necessary to effectively support the children in school but questioned how successful this sometimes is. Region-specific issues were discussed by the North Queensland group.

A team approach

Amanda stated that "there have been some schools that have been wonderful" in terms of supporting these children: "Some of these kids have been quite seriously traumatised in their past, so we need to get better at our way of working with them from a team perspective" (FG1_ASW7). Terri commented on the difficulty of accessing and co-ordinating the "right support" needed.

> We know how difficult it can be in the Education system and the Allied Health system to find the right supports … and that's difficult for anybody. It's difficult for professionals in the field as well. It's a shame when this happens (FG1_ASW1).

Emily added that, while some parents seek assistance to advocate for their children at school, "It's hard to know where to direct that when there's so many different people involved" (FG1_ASW2). Joanne explained the difficulty in finding appropriate support due to the lack of common understanding by all relevant parties about the issues faced by adoptees.

> The Education system needs to know that adopted children may present with complicated issues – that we as parents don't really understand how to manage – but together we need to work out strategies for how school experience can work for our children (FG3_P3).

Joanne believed that these children need help to "fit in, to feel accepted, not different; a focus on building the children's self-esteem" as well as "academic support" (FG3_P3). Other parents also insisted that the "team" within the school must include parents and teachers working well together (Samantha, FG3_P2), "backed up by the leadership team" (Nerida, FG3_P1; see also Theme 9: Communication). Emily's experience of working towards a team approach with two different schools provided examples of varied outcomes:

> I've also been involved with two different schools in going and meeting with the principal, the class teacher, the adoptive parent and usually somebody from either the Allied Health Department or a teacher's aide, and we then develop an education plan. So what sort of ESL support the child will get, what a transition plan will look like in terms of the child going to that school. One of them was really helpful and I think went really well …. The other one, I think we tried to do a lot of providing information about pre-adoptive trauma and what the child had been through so that they had a bit of an understanding and … we got nowhere. They were very, you know, just didn't want to hear what we had to say …. Nearly everyone said, "Well we've got children", and kind of really weren't very receptive to what I had to share (FG1_ASW2).

Emily explained that this second school encounter left her "feeling about this big" (gesturing feeling small) and, in spite of her efforts to educate the school about the child's prior experience and current needs, she was "basically dismissed" (FG1_ASW2). However, Amanda said that another school she worked with "embraced" the information she provided and sought more. She said, "I've gone in

and done an education presentation with the teachers and the principal … they've really enjoyed having that information" (FG1_ASW7).

These experiences suggest that a team approach to supporting adoptees in school is valued by some schools, but not by others. The success of the team may relate to the degree of knowledge and understanding by school personnel, the willingness by school administrators to include and accept the advice of external agencies, and the difficulty of accessing and co-ordinating "expert" team members. Investigation at a more systemic level into the ways and means that this may occur would provide a foundation for the development of successful team support strategies within and beyond the school.

Information and support for educators

In addition to the facilitation of effective teams, three focus groups emphasised the importance of a systemically-driven approach to providing information and support to teachers of adoptees. Adoption and support workers said that it is generally parents of primary school age children who seek their support (Leanne, FG1_ASW5), requesting that they "provide some information to the school or do some advocating on their behalf" (Emily, FG1_ASW2). Leanne stated that teachers rarely make contact with PASQ. She said, "I've had one teacher contact us on one occasion and that teacher was referred by a parent. And that teacher showed a lot of interest in developing their knowledge further" (FG1_ASW5).This is understandable as teachers would not generally be aware of this service unless introduced by the adoptive parent. Leanne explained that PASQ is proactive in sending information to schools when an adoptee is still under the guardianship of the government[20] making contact and forwarding an information booklet to the school. After the guardianship period ends, however, it becomes the parent's responsibility to source assistance and information through Post Adoption Services.

Parents in one focus group identified a gross motor movement program called "Learning Connections" which has made a difference to children with early developmental delays in one school. Judy, adoptive parent and teacher at the school, first investigated this program to support her son. Early steps taken outside of school

[20] This time frame varies between country groups, but is commonly at least for the first year that the child is with their new family.

incorporated a range of screening processes including "primitive reflexes … postural reflexes … gut analysis … allergies" among other things. She suggested, "If children are showing certain behavioural symptoms", Post Adoption Services should be in a position to refer adoptees for this type of screening. She said, "The Department doesn't offer that, and they should" (FG2_P5). Through her own research, Judy found this program a positive support for her son's needs.

A gap exists in the dissemination of information to teachers from a position of authority (beyond parents as advocates), and in the provision of post-adoption support through professional development and training. In particular, this gap exists for internationally adopted children who are no longer under state guardianship at the time of starting school. Some parents stressed the need for further investigation into post-adoption screening process for adoptees, as well as gross motor programs inclusive of all school-age children with a range of developmental delays, as a method of early intervention in schools.

Support for children and parents

In addition to advocating and providing information to schools, the support most often provided to families involves counselling for parents and/or children as well as parenting workshops. Terri confirmed that the process of "normalising" the adoption experience is important because "the perception is that it is not normal within the context of other families' experience [but] it is very normal in what we know is adopted children's experiences" (FG1_ASW1). Leanne explained that PASQ also run workshops for children, helping them with issues of "self-worth" and "identity", providing "coping strategies" and building "resilience", as well as suggesting "self-regulation" and "relaxation" strategies (FG1_ASW5). Amanda added that she is "increasingly looking with parents at working with OTs" (FG1_ASW7).

A parent, Robyn explained that she was requested by adoption authorities to speak to a group of prospective adoptive parents about a range of issues such as "neurobiology and trauma, adopting out of birth order [and] all the special needs that are likely to be adopted in Queensland…. I had 12 topics in two hours" (FG2_P2). The range of issues that prospective parents need to be aware of highlights the need for post-adoption support around these issues, some of which may be complex and impact on school. While some parents may be in the best position to offer support to

prospective adoptive parents, others may need further support, particularly when explaining their children's needs to teachers. Sharon also emphasised the need "to know all the resources" available to parents following their child's adoption (FG2_P1).

Regional support

The level and type of support available for and accessed by adoptive families in regional centres were discussed by two groups. Adoption and support workers identified workshops run for those impacted by adoption and one parent group highlighted their self-sufficiency with some inconvenience for families in regional areas. Adoption support worker Leanne stated:

> In some regional areas we've provided parenting workshops to intercountry adoptive parents. So when we go to a remote area we have practitioner training and we have "Adoption Connections" which is a group of parties affected by adoption and sometimes we have specialist workshops for only intercountry adoptive parents. A lot of it's about normalising and normal developmental stages, also with a focus on intercountry adoption. … So that touches on a variety of issues that are specific to them, and education always crops up. It's not just focused on education (FG1_ASW5).

When parents were asked whether or not they access such workshops in their region, Jenna asked, "Is there post-adoption support out there?" This indicated that she was unaware of such support. Robyn clarified, "We all just talk to each other", within the support group rather than relying on external support (FG2_P2). Sharon shared, "Resource-wise, I haven't had a problem, being regional. The only problem I've had is with the quality. My son has to have an operation and I now have to go down to Brisbane to get it fixed" (FG2_P1).

Post Adoption Services can and do provide workshops for those impacted by adoption. These are not, however, readily accessible to all stakeholders, including teachers, who work with adoptees. The regional parent group highlighted the value of local support groups run by adoptive parents. Once again, the co-ordination and dissemination of information and services which target these children's educational needs could, no doubt, improve the quality of their school experience.

5.5 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Generally, the perception was that intercountry adoptees' experience of school is different rather than better or worse than their non-adopted peers. Positive experiences were associated with a school's knowledge and understanding of the unique needs of the child and a willingness to communicate with parents to provide effective and timely support. Negative experiences were associated with educators' lack of understanding or willingness to communicate with parents about adoption-related issues, as well as experiences of racism and discrimination.

Adoptive parents often prioritised the protective factors that an education system or school offered their children. Important considerations for system or school selection included family values, consistent and appropriate friendships, cultural diversity, acceptance of family difference, and the school's ability to cater for specific adoption-related needs. When parents perceived that a school could not understand or cater for these needs, they were likely to seek alternatives.

The teacher was considered integral to the children's school experience and parents generally preferred teachers who were nurturing and empathetic and who communicated effectively with them. Some participants found difficulty in explaining to educators the complex nature of trauma as it pertains to the children's early life experience, and this caused frustration occasionally leading to poor relationships. Some parents occasionally felt the need to advocate on their children's behalf and wanted open channels of communication. This included advance communication and consultation about specific curricular and co-curricular topics and activities that some children may find difficult. The general perception was that educators' understanding of the impact of trauma, including grief and loss, on brain development, behaviour and learning, and psychosocial development is limited.

Many children who joined their families through adoption experienced similar developmental milestones to their non-adopted peers. Additional psychosocial factors such as the acknowledgement and social response of others to family difference, and the child's maturity, personality and capacity for resilience, influenced their school experience.

The transition of adoptees to school between year levels, teachers and schools was challenging for some children who were new to family and country, for those

who did best with routine and consistency, and for some parents who found it difficult to explain adoption-related issues to teachers each year.

Parents and adoption support workers called for timely and accurate ascertainment of learning needs when the children commenced school to avoid delays which may further impede progress. This included the desire for greater knowledge, understanding and strategies around the learning of language and the management of anxiety-related behaviours.

Cultural and familial difference made "fitting in" at school more difficult for some children than others. Pre-adoption experiences or language difficulties hampered social development and relationships in some instances. The racial and cultural composition of local communities and schools made a difference to the children's school experience, and parents called for a greater emphasis on global education in schools for the benefit of all children as opposed to the celebration of discrete cultural days.

Post-adoption support is available, but not commonly accessed by educators, as generally the parent must first introduce the teacher to the service, due to access and confidentiality restrictions. Parents in regional areas highlighted the value of local support groups run by adoptive parents in preference to official support organisations.

Chapter 6: Multicase Study

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The major research component is a multicase study of 10 family cases. This chapter presents findings and collective analysis of the cases. Each case includes background data about the children's adoption stories to provide greater understanding of the context for this study and to address what emerges as a significant theme: the impact of pre-adoption experience on children's experience of school. Given the sensitivity of such stories, no attempt was made to extract further information beyond that which parents freely shared, and children were not questioned about their pre-adoption experiences.

6.2 CHAPTER ORGANISATION

This chapter comprises three sections: i) details of the 10 cases; ii) description of individual family contexts; iii) findings, in the form of an integrated analysis of the major and minor themes using the framework presented in Chapter 3. Information was gathered on the family context, reason for participating in the research and participants' perspectives on significant school experiences, in relation to the 13 previously identified themes. Each case involved an interview with the parent/s and conversations with the child/ren (excluding two children who declined to participate). These are supported with reference to documents provided by most parents. Children's drawings were used to stimulate conversation around broad topics, to assist children with language difficulties and to illustrate their experiences.

6.3 THE CASES

6.3.1 The participants

The study included 10 mothers, five fathers and 15 children (13 directly participating; two represented by their parents). Seven children were adopted under the age of four; eight at age four years or older. At the time of data collection, eight children were aged 6-9 years (lower primary) and seven were aged 10-12 years (middle and upper primary). Countries of origin were Africa, Taiwan, Philippines, India and Thailand.

Table 6.1 provides an overview of the number of children involved in the study, their age at adoption, their age at the time of data collection and their countries of origin. Table 6.2 provides the ages of the children at adoption, age at time of interview and the children's positive, mixed or negative school experience. Six families identified their children's school experience as very positive, mostly positive with some challenges, or mixed (some positive and some negative experiences). Children in two families reported negative experiences which turned positive with changes of schools. Two families had very negative experiences with plans to change schools the following year. For one of these it would be the third change of school by the start of Year 3. The 13 participating children mostly reported similar perceptions of their school experience to those of their parents.

Table 6.1

Participants' Age at adoption, Current age and Country of origin

Age at adoption		**Current age**		**Country of origin and number of children**				
0-3	**4+**	**6-9**	**10-12**	**Africa**	**Philippines**	**Taiwan**	**Thailand**	**India**
7	8	8	7	7	4	2	1	1

Table 6.2

Age at adoption, Current age and School experience for individual cases[21].

		Individual cases									
Criteria	**Child**	**C1**	**C2**	**C3**	**C4**	**C5**	**C6**	**C7**	**C8**	**C9**	**C10**
Age at adoption	**1**	2y	1y9m	4½y*	3y	3½y	6y11 m	1 ½ y	4m	2y	6y4m *[22]
	2	1y4m	1 ½ y	6y	3y			4 ½ y			
Age at data collection	**1**	8y	8y	12y	8y	10y	10y	12y	6y	10y	9y
	2	12y	11y	9y	8y			7y			
School experience [23]	**1**	+-	+-	+-	+-	--	-+	+-	-+	++	--
	2	++	+-	+-	+-			+-			

[21] Country of origin is excluded from individual cases in order to maintain anonymity.
[22] *Two children adopted at or close to school age declined to participate but were represented by their parents.
[23] School experiences identifiers: ++very positive experiences; +- overall positive experience with minor challenges OR mixed experience; -+ overall negative experience with some improvement with change of school; -- very negative experiences leading to change of school.

The case contexts, with referencing identifiers, are presented in the order in which they were conducted. Table 6.3 provides a summary of the case number, full case codes and in-text identifiers used for parent interviews and children's conversations. Documents used in each case are provided in Appendix Q. These varied between cases and included, for example, school report cards and achievement certificates, medical reports and diagnostic assessments, paediatrician/psychologist/ adoption and specialist support services letters to schools, emails from parent to school principals/district supervisor/teachers and to the researcher.

Table 6.3

Case, Case Code and Identifier [24]

Case	Case Code	Identifier
1	C1_P1_Craig_Smith_14_09_13	C1_P1
	C1_P2_Deborah_Smith_14_09_13	C1_P2
	C1_Ch1_Matthew_Smith_14_09_13	C1_Ch1
	C1_Ch2_Andrea_Smith_14_09_13**	C1_Ch2
2	C2_P_Grace_Paulsen_14_09_14	C2_P
	C2_Ch1_Sarah_Paulsen_14_09_14	C2_Ch1
	C2_Ch2_Richard_Paulsen_14_09_14	C2_Ch2
3	C3_P1_Peter_Graham_14_09_20	C3_P1
	C3_P2_Joanne_Graham_14_09_20	C3_P2
	C3_Ch1_Sienna_Graham_14_09_20	C3_Ch
4	C4_P1_Brett_Jackson_14_10_18	C4_P1
	C4_P2_Karen_Jackson_14_10_18	C4_P2
	C4_Ch1_Brendon_Jackson_14_10_18	C4_Ch1
	C4_Ch2_Marlena_Jackson_14_10_18	C4_Ch2
5	C5_P1_Cooper_Wilson_14_10_19	C5_P1
	C5_P2_Renee_Wilson_14_10_19	C5_P2
	C5_Ch_Rick_Wilson_14_10_19	C5_Ch

[24] All names used in the Case Codes are pseudonyms.

6	C6_P1_John_Webb_14_10_25	C6_P1
	C6_P2_Lana_Webb_14_10_25	C6_P2
	C6_Ch_Sita_Webb_14_10_25	C6_Ch
7	C7_P_Leonie_Feldman_14_10_26	C7_P
	C7_Ch1_Germaine_Feldman_14_10_26	C7_Ch1
	C7_Ch2_Joseph_Feldman_14_10_26	C7_Ch2
8	C8_P_Monica_Brady_14_11_03	C8_P
	C8_Ch_Melissa_Brady_14_11_03	C8_Ch
9	C9_P_Diane_Brownley_14_11_08	C9_P
	C9_Ch_Amaris_Brownley_14_11_08	C9_Ch
10	C10_P_Janet_Travers_14_11_10	C10_P

6.3.2 Development of themes and sub-themes

All children's conversations and parents' interviews were recorded and transcribed, and transcripts were verified for accuracy. The software program NVivo 10 (QSR International, 1999-2014) was used to store, deconstruct and code themes and sub-themes. Nine themes and 36 sub-themes emerged from the multicase study (Appendix R). The reduction in the number of themes was due to the redefinition of what constitutes a theme and what was better used to inform the background to each case or future implications and recommendations. Therefore, the themes "type of school experience" and "type and selection of system or school" identified in Chapter 5 were more appropriately used to develop individual case contexts in the multicase study (Chapter 6). The theme "post-adoption support" generally revealed parents' suggestions and requests for future or additional support from adoption services groups external to the school. This data was used to further inform Chapters 7 and 8 as distinct from adding commentary on the children's current school experience. In addition, "behaviour" was refocused to "anxiety-related behaviour" as this defined the type of behavioural issues parents raised. The theme "communication" focused on communication with teachers and school

administrators, hence this was also redefined. The reader may benefit from referring to Appendix R throughout the reading of this chapter.

While all themes were addressed across the multicase study, diverse experiences amongst families resulted in varying emphasis being placed on these in individual cases. Hence the significance of both the individual case and the collective multicase was highlighted by this study.

6.4 INDIVIDUAL CASE CONTEXTS

6.4.1 The Smith Family

Craig and Deborah Smith adopted their children, Matthew and Andrea from overseas, at two years and 16 months old respectively. At interview, Matthew (aged 12), was in Year Seven and Andrea (aged 8) was in Year Two. Both commenced school in the Prep year and achieved high levels of success. Parents reported positive school experiences with infrequent instances of inadequate teacher understanding regarding Matthew's occasional anxiety: "For the most part … very positive" (C1_P2; C1_P1).

The children attended a large, metropolitan state school with an enrolment of approximately 1250 from Prep to Year Seven. Deborah described the school as "extremely … and proudly … multicultural" with enrolments representing 22 nationalities (C1_P2). Deborah was a teacher at her children's school. Craig's parents fostered several children and one foster sister grew up with him since he was a very small child. The couple reported that these conditions and experiences contributed to making them "more open" and understanding of the impact of family difference on children at school. Deborah explained, "Being a teacher, I think you approach things differently … probably more trusting of my colleagues. I know how they think and I know that they mostly put children first. It's not such a stress" (C1_P2). Craig commented on his relationship with his foster sister: "Family is not necessarily blood. Relationship is more important" (C1_P1).

Significant influences on the children's school experience were highlighted. These included selection of school (with a multicultural student population) and positive parent/teacher relationships (including easy access and open communication with teachers).

6.4.2 The Paulsen Family

Grace Paulsen adopted her children, Sarah and Richard at 21 months and 18 months respectively. At the time of interview, Sarah (aged 11) was in Year Five and Richard (aged 8) was in Year Two. The Paulsens enjoyed an extensive support network, including friendships with other adoptive families. They live in a multicultural urban community of which 39% were born in New Zealand, England, Vietnam, India or South Korea and 46.3% were second generation immigrants (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 28 March, 2013).

Since their prep year, the children have attended a large state school with enrolments over 1000 (school website, 2015). Both reported enjoying school, having formed many friendships with children from varying cultural backgrounds and experiencing academic and extra-curricular success (Doc_1, Doc_2; C2_Ch1, C2_Ch2).

Overall, the family reported few challenges at home or at school resulting from their children's pre- or post-adoption experiences. Overall, the children had very positive experiences at school and Grace reported very little connection between pre- and post-adoption experience and school.

6.4.3 The Graham Family

Joanne and Peter Graham adopted two daughters, Mary at 4½ years and Sienna at 6½ years. At the time of interview, Mary (aged 12) was in Year Seven and Sienna (aged 9) was in Year Three. Sienna, a bubbly and talkative young girl was happy to talk about her school experiences, while Mary was more reserved and declined to participate. She was happy, however, for her parents to discuss her school experiences so these have been included.

Mary and Sienna attended a well-resourced Catholic primary school. Mary commenced in prep year, while Sienna started in Year One due to her age at adoption. Parents reported positive experiences and success at school, despite the children's individual learning difficulties. For example, Mary acquired English oral skills quickly after coming to Australia, but struggled with reading. In Year Five, she was diagnosed with dyslexia, and continues to have difficulty with her reading and writing skills. While Sienna attended school in her birth country, first language skills did not develop as expected (Doc_4). Data suggest she experienced "significant

learning … [and] core language difficulties" (Doc_3, Doc_4) which led to a verification of learning needs and additional support at school.

This case identified mostly positive school experiences. However, it also highlighted implications for transition programs, identification and intervention for intercountry adoptees with language and learning difficulties and collaborative processes between parents and school.

6.4.4 The Jackson Family

The Jacksons are a large family with both biological and adopted children. The family lived in an underdeveloped country for several years. Brendon and Marlena (both aged 8½ at time of interview), lived with their biological grandmother until seven months of age, before coming into the care of Karen and Brett Jackson. They were adopted just prior to turning three years old. The family resided overseas until the children were 7½ years then moved to Australia for school commencement. They had resided in Australia for one year at the time of interview.

Brett described starting school and finding the right education system for their children as "a difficult time education-wise" (C4_P1). In their birth country, they began very successfully in a "cottage school system"[25]. It was clear to both parents, however, that Marlena exhibited developmental delays and "couldn't keep up" at school. Karen home schooled her daughter part-time, and she attended school for some subjects. Just prior to moving to Australia, the children enrolled in a new British International School, to prepare them for more formalised education systems. However, this was reported to be "an abysmal failure", especially for Marlena (C4_P1). After six weeks, the children were withdrawn from this school and home schooling resumed. Karen explained Marlena's international school experience:

> She didn't get a lot of the concepts … in (birth country) if you are not clever you are deemed lazy, so they just kind of wrote her off and let her wander around the school … that would have been an expensive day care for her (C4_P2).

In Australia, the children were enrolled in a non-denominational, medium-sized (900 students), Prep to Year 12, private Christian school. Although the same

[25] The parents described a "cottage school system" as similar to home schooling; however, multiple families work together and have a teacher.

age, Brendon was placed in Year 2, and Marlena in Year 1. At interview, Karen and Brett (C4_P1; C4_P2) presented positive attitudes towards any challenges, viewing them as opportunities for building resilience. They preferred to focus on their children's overall improvement as a measure of success. They described their school experience at the time of interview as "positive, [or] definitely more positive than negative. There have definitely been challenges, but we have seen growth in both of them through those challenges" (C4_P2).

This case provided the opportunity to compare the school experiences of two children the same age with the same pre-and post-adoption experiences. In particular, it highlighted varying academic, social and emotional needs and school responses.

6.4.5 The Wilson Family

Rick was adopted by parents Renee and Cooper Wilson at age 3½ from a country plagued by ethnic-based civil war. At the time of interview, he was 10 years and in Year Five. Initially shy, Rick soon warmed to the use of the iPad as a tool to help him converse about school experiences.

Rick was in Australia for approximately nine months, before commencing Kindergarten in a large K-12 independent college at the age of four years and four months. While the school promotes the transition of international students into the community (school website, 2015), according to Rick's parents, it has a predominantly Caucasian student population. For several years Rick was the only child in the school from his birth country, until the enrolment of a "little group of refugees" (C5_P2). Afterwards, a small number of children from other cultural groups also attended the school and an International student program became available (school website, 2015).

Rick's Kindergarten year was reported as positive due to personal attributes of and relationships with the teacher. However, his later school experiences were reported as negative, with Rick exhibiting escalating anxiety and physical ailments (C5_P1; C5_P2). While he enjoyed friendships and sport, Rick was often anxious about attending school due to reported episodes of bullying by other children, and "discrimination" and "targeting" by teachers (C5_P1, C5_P2, C5_Ch). His drawings and conversations confirmed that he often worried about what would happen at school. Consequently, communication between parents, teacher/s and the

administration team deteriorated, leading to plans to change school the following year.

This case illustrates a number of social and relational considerations. It highlighted issues of racial diversity, as well as the importance of effective communication and relationships between parents and the school.

6.4.6 The Webb Family

Ten year old Sita was adopted at an estimated age of six years 11 months into the Webb family in rural Queensland. At the time of interview, she was aged approximately 10 years and enjoyed a warm, often playful and visibly affectionate relationship with her parents, Lana and John. Sita's bedroom revealed the great care the parents had taken to reflect her cultural background and younger emotional age, but Sita's complexities soon emerged. Her broken English at times necessitated her parents' interpretation. Her pre-adolescent delight in fashion, nail polish and jewellery could not mask the obvious gaps in her early childhood experiences, as she indulged equally in play representative of a pre-school aged child. She proved adept at using previously unknown drawing software on the iPad, yet she exhibited difficulty with concepts such as gender and age.

John and Lana considered three school options for Sita: i) a small rural state school in their local community; ii) a nearby larger school with a special education unit; or iii) a designated special school, two suburbs away. They opted for the small rural school, due to concerns about her ability to cope in a special education unit. They were also influenced by advice from an Administration Officer (at the local state school): "It's really hard to get into special schools or special ed. units nowadays. They like to keep kids into mainstream … because they have to be verified or ascertained" (C6_P1; C6_P2).

Sita commenced school in Australia at approximately seven years old. She remained at her first school for three years (2011-13), which reduced to fewer than 50 students and two teachers, all of whom (apart from Sita) were Caucasian (C6_P2). This first school experience was reported as difficult for Sita as she became disengaged, anxious and unhappy (C6_P2). Her parents were very discouraged and would have welcomed more timely and informed advice about school selection with support mechanisms appropriate for Sita. Only in the third year did the fourth

Advisory Visiting Teacher (AVT) to the school say: "You've been misled". It was this AVT who "put the whole special school process" in their minds (C6_P1).

In 2014, Sita enrolled in a special school in a neighbouring suburb, which had a flexible curriculum and multi-age approach which was more suited to her needs (C6_P2). Schooling there was described as being "more about life skills" than an academic focus (C6_P1). Sita's new teacher was reported as seeing her as "a bright girl, [who has] just missed all those foundations" (C6_P2). Both parents were content with the new school. John said, "When people go, 'Oh, is she progressing there?' I say, 'Who cares … she's really happy, and that's all I really care about.' I can go to work and just know that Sita is happy going to school" (C6_P1). Sita also confirmed that she was happy at her new school (C6_Ch).

Sita's case demonstrated the need for informed advice regarding school selection, accurate diagnosis of learning needs and flexibility for school age intercountry adoptees, particularly for students who present with cognitive, social and language delays often linked to the trauma and neglect experienced in early life (Docs 26-31).

6.4.7 The Feldman Family

The Feldman family adopted four children from the same overseas country, with the youngest two being the main focus of this case. Germaine was 12 (in Year Six) and Joseph was 7½ years (in Year Two) at the time of interview.

The first three children to join the family were adopted at the approximate age of two or less. These three children all had periods of home schooling (varying between one and three years), as well as formal school attendance during their primary school years. The youngest child Joseph was adopted at 4½ years old. The pressure on the family resulting from the final adoption process made it difficult to continue home schooling. Leonie stated: "If you're fighting two governments, you can't do home school" (C7_P).

In his birth country, Joseph lived first with elderly grandparents and then with other family members, all of whom spoke varying languages. Consequently, he could communicate in four languages. He commenced school in his birth country in the private system (funded by his adoptive parents) at age three. Once in Australia, he

spent 10 months at home where his mother focused on "intensive attachment parenting" (C7_P), before he commenced school in prep at the recommended age.

Leonie described the children's school experiences as "a mixed bag". Her children had some "amazing teachers" and child-focused principals, but also experienced instances of bullying and racism. Overall, schools (in particular, state schools) and school personnel were reported as welcoming and supportive of the children and each child experienced varying degrees of growth and academic success.

This case illustrated the significance of school culture on student experience and reinforced the particular influence of beliefs and values, from school leadership to the wider school community. In addition, this case highlighted the value of cooperation between parents and schools in the education of minority groups with diverse needs.

6.4.8 The Brady Family

Melissa was adopted by Monica and her husband directly from a well-resourced, overseas adoption service at four months (C8_P). She was six years old and in the equivalent of Year One at the time of interview. Melissa's birth mother was 14 years old and in good health. According to Monica, Melissa is also "incredibly healthy". An only child, she presents as a happy, bubbly and outgoing little girl. Melissa commenced school as the youngest in her cohort, at 4½ years of age. Monica participated in one of the parent focus groups conducted several months prior to the case study interview, when her daughter was enrolled in a large private Prep-to-Year 12 school, with the goal of providing her with a "consistent, safe, predictable" environment with "less change [which is] better for adopted kids" (C8_P). In her first year at school, Melissa "flourished" in the contained and supportive Prep environment: "Had a great year in Prep, really great; no problems". However, in Grade One, with a change of teacher and school "structure and boundaries", Melissa became "socially marginalised" by her peers and distressed and angry about going to school (C8_P). It was also evident that her literacy and maths work had deteriorated from the previous year. This prompted her parents to employ a tutoring service (April to December, 2014), after which Melissa "had completed the curriculum work to a satisfactory level" (Doc_26).

Although an active volunteer in the school, Monica was unable to communicate well with Melissa's Year One teacher whom she reported as lacking racial empathy and understanding about adoption-related issues, being hostile towards her and other parents and discouraging children from reporting social problems. This led to a decision to change schools in term four and Monica enrolled Melissa in an alternative independent system with a flexible, multi-age, individualized approach to learning. At the time of interview, Melissa had enjoyed her first two weeks in the new school (enrolment 137 children; class size 18; C8_P; C8_Ch).

This case described a negative school experience, leading to a change in education system, school and teacher with positive outcomes. It highlighted the significance of the social construction of the school and the importance of the teacher in meeting individual children's needs.

Both Sita and Melissa confirmed their initial negative followed by positive experience following a change of school in Figures 6.1 and 6.2.

Sita (age 10) drew herself feeling "very cranky" and "sad" at "Mr G's school". She said: "He's cross and not quite nice.… But I got no friends. Sometimes I feel a bit sad … I just walk away, because sometime, no reason do this no more. No reason, no talking, no adults, no friends. I just walk away" (C6_Ch).

Sita was evidently happy when she spoke about her new school (the "Tiger school"): "I like the Tiger school the best, because I love it. I love the Tiger school … I love to all my friend there. … Yeah, lots of friends" (C6_Ch). As she drew, she explained: "Here I am happy. Yeah [excitedly], this is happy! Sita very happy today." She drew herself smiling, and she chose the colour yellow because it is a "happy colour" (C6_Ch).

Figure 6.1. Own choice: Comparing two schools

(above) Sita at "Mr G's school"
(below) Sita at the "Tiger school" (age 10)

"I'm going to draw girls being mean to me … I'm saying, 'Stop it, I do not like it!'"

"And I'm going to do them in evil colours, very dark colours."

Happy at her new school, her hair flows freely when she runs.

Friends are the most important thing at the new school.

Figure 6.2. Own choice: Comparing two schools

Melissa (age 6) compares schools and social experiences. In the bottom row, Melissa draws a report card for each school. First school report card: "0/0 means it's very bad.1/1 means it's sort of bad." Second school report card includes a love heart: "10/10 or 100/100" (C8_Ch).

"I'm getting a red face because I've had enough."

On stage with a friend, "Saying how we don't like this school".

Melissa enjoys the flexibility of her new school …
"You get to have morning tea whenever you want, but it has to be past nine.
… And you can work outside".

6.4.9 The Brownley Family

Diane adopted Amaris at approximately two years of age, while undertaking volunteer work in an orphanage in her daughter's birth country. Diane and Amaris lived a further seven months in the country and continued visiting and working at the orphanage. Supportive family and church friends from Australia also visited during this time. Diane explained that working with the orphanage has "always been a part of our life". Together, they made lifelong friends, which prompted a recent return visit and travel to other countries to meet with other adoptive families and their children from the orphanage.

> There was never any question of not going back. … The sooner we could go back the better for her I think too, and seeing her over there, she just loved it. She just thrived. … Every morning she'd be up early – "Come on mum, we've got to pack our things so that we can go to the orphanage" – and she'd be off feeding the babies (C9_P).

At the time of interview Amaris was aged 10 and in Year Four. She enjoyed a strong social support network (family, church and friends) and she is comfortable with her adoption experience, her sense of belonging to two countries, and family life in general. She commenced school in Australia in Prep at an Independent Christian school, at the age of five. She attended [School A] until Year Two (2010-2012) when

her family relocated. She transferred to the same type of school [School B] for Years Three and Four (2013-2014). Both were large, well-resourced (Prep to Year 12) schools. Both schools also had multicultural student populations and enrolled international students from up to 10 different nations. School B offered intensive English courses for second language learners prior to entering mainstream classes (school websites, 2015). While Amaris did not need these classes, this did foster open communication with education professionals about possible language and learning issues.

Amaris reported positive school experiences in both schools (C9_P). Diane attributed these positive experiences to the culture of the schools, access to specialist support staff, teacher understanding of student diversity and learning needs, positive social relationships, and open communication with educators. This case highlighted the relationship between cultural diversity in school and positive school experience, as well as the value of access to trained school staff when additional support is required.

6.4.10 The Travers Family

Janet and her husband adopted Melanie at age six years and four months from a foster care/orphanage setting. Melanie was aged nine and in Year Three at the time of interview. She exhibited no English language skills when she joined her family but Janet's previous experience in working with refugee children enabled her to communicate with Melanie during the early months at home using body language and drawings. Gradually, they were able to identify some of her pre-adoption experiences that continued to have an impact on her experience of school.

Melanie attended three schools in two countries by the age of nine. She commenced school in her birth country at age three where she developed early native language skills. There she experienced the "stigma attached to children who do not live with their birth family or who were known to be adopted" and the strict discipline that typified schooling in that country. Janet said, "Children learnt quickly that kids don't talk in school - the teacher does the work, the kids write". Classrooms were quiet. In Australia, Melanie first enrolled in a Year One class in term four at the local state school. However, the principal would not approve her enrolment in Year One the following year. With the support of a letter from Adoption and Specialist

Support Services (AdSSS), Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services (DCCSDS), Janet was permitted to enrol her daughter in Year One in another small, local private school (243 students; school website 2015). The school website states: "The school will be open and welcoming to all who wish to join it, providing it has the capacity to cater for the needs of the student" (2015). Janet argued, however, that this school did not have the capacity to cater for Melanie's needs socially, emotionally or academically and that her school experience was "challenging on a weekly basis" with "most days [being] hard to get her to school" (C10_P). Melanie's transition to school in Australia was reported as being fraught with uncertainty.

At the time of interview, the family were making preparations to enrol Melanie in a larger, inner-city state school (800 students; school website, 2015). The school website states that the school values and celebrates its cultural diversity and comprises approximately 45 different nationalities within the school. It offers student support services which include a Speech and Language Pathologist and "English support to students who speak another language, who may be newly arrived in Australia or born in Australia and have English language needs". Janet said:

> Looking at the [school] website, it actually said any children … under the Department of Child Services and Disability, they will accept them. So I didn't even know that … I think if I knew right from the word go that [this school] offered intensive ESL, offered in-class support and would accept children from outside the area if they were under the Department, I would have put her there straight away (C10_P).

An initial application for enrolment, submitted at the end of 2014, was denied due to the family residing outside the school's catchment area. Had the family received timely advice from the supervising government authority during its period of guardianship (18 months), Melanie would have been entitled to enrol in this school regardless of her residential address. As a result the family had to re-apply for enrolment and, at the time of interview, were preparing to relocate their home in order to meet eligibility requirements.

6.5 THE FINDINGS

The findings are reported using the multi-dimensional theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 3: Attachment and trauma, social constructionism and childhood development theory. For ease of identification, children's pseudonyms are formatted using bold and italics in the first instance in each section.

6.5.1 Attachment and trauma

In the area of attachment and trauma, a major emergent theme was that of the impact of pre-adoption experience. Factors included age at adoption and attachment opportunity, evidence of trauma and/or neglect, known and unknown histories, and pre-adoption care arrangements. The prevalence of anxiety-related behaviours and approaches to transitioning these children to school was also significant.

The impact of pre-adoption experience

Age at adoption and attachment opportunity

This study's findings align with the research which identifies age at adoption as significant to an adoptee's cognitive, social and language development and the impact of delays on school performance (van Ijzendoorn et al., 2005; Rutter, 1998; Gindis, 2005; Glennen, 2005, 2006; Glennen & Masters, 2002; Glennen et al., 2011; Jean-Baptiste, 2012, Judge, 2004; Meese, 2002). This study also identifies further variables that may be more significant than age at adoption (Tan et al., 2010), including the simultaneous occurrence of attachment opportunity and transition to school.

Overall, positive school experiences occurred for the majority of children adopted under two years of age. Grace stated: "I don't see that they have had any negative issues because of adoption.… I can't think of anything that has impacted on their schooling" (C2_P). Deborah concurred and added that "emotional triggers" sometimes occur for her children as a result of their "adoption journey", but pre-adoption experience does not appear to have any significant impact (C1_2). Diane identified unknown history and health issues due to abandonment as a possible cause of some ongoing learning difficulties; however, her daughter's experience of school has been positive overall (C9_P).

In contrast, ***Melissa***, adopted at four months, had a negative first school experience; however, her mother argued that this was linked to teacher traits, parent-

teacher communication, young age at school commencement (4½ years), and socialisation and supervision practices within the school rather than pre-adoption experience (C8_P). Despite being adopted at approximately two years, Leonie's (C7_P) daughter ***Eva*** could not cope in her pre-school year and was withdrawn half-way through the year and home schooled. Leonie explained:

> I didn't think she was ready and I got talked into it, and this is where the positive racism can be a problem because the teacher wanted her. Three months later the teacher was coming to me and saying, "She's very immature, she's following other kids", and I'm saying, "Well, that's what I suspected" (C7_P).

Eva spent the remainder of the year at home, "where she needed to be" (C7_P). Several years later, it was confirmed through medical testing that her actual age was at least six months younger than the adoption paperwork indicated. Eva's brother ***Joseph***, however, coped very well at school, having been schooled in his birth country prior to adoption at 4½ years. Leonie stated, "He's naturally academic. In [his birth country] he was 93 percentile in his class" (C7_P).

So, while age at adoption seems important, this study suggests that there are other factors that need associated consideration. For example, Eva's unconfirmed age/readiness at school commencement and repeated abandonment and deprivation in her first two years of life contrasted with Joseph's prior school experience in his birth country, his teachers' previous experience with his older adopted siblings, and his personality (including his capacity for resilience).

This study also shows that attachment opportunity between children and adoptive parents is important and this is consistent with Attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1958, 1980; Erikson, 1980). Generally, the families in this study who reported positive school experiences were either adopted or cared for at age two or younger by their new parents. In contrast, however, positive school experiences were evident in one family which adopted two children, one close to and one at school age, and this was related to intensive parental involvement in the transition of the children to school and positive and effective parent/teacher/school leader communication. Van den Dries et al., (2008) confirm that children adopted under the age of 12 months would experience more secure attachments than those

adopted at an older age and this has implications for older placed adoptees' transition to school.

For Joanne, attachment opportunity was a priority, given that it needed to occur at both home and school. Both parents explained their approach with the school:

> Well, we went to the principal … I said I've got to be there. That's it. I just said that's what has to happen. … I was able to get a lot of things because I was able to say that this kid's only been here a few months, she can't speak English. I've got to be with her. I can't sit over there. I've got to be there with her. So with gymnastics, I was allowed to go on to the floor (C3_P2). They were very sympathetic to the situation, because they knew this kid has probably been traumatised, has been through a lot. We had no resistance (C2_P1).

In Joanne's case, attachment opportunity did not precede school attendance, but rather school became the arena for the consolidation of healthy attachment: "I was looking for the attachment signals …. Like when I knew she was attached to me, I knew I could go" (FG3_P2). The importance of adoptive parent/child attachment before commencing school is supported by Attachment theory and confirmed by adoption and support personnel (see Chapter 5). This case highlighted the attachment benefits of a collaborative and flexible approach to transitioning older adoptees to school.

The majority of children in this study who were adopted closer to school age experienced some difficulties at school. ***Sienna*** experienced language and learning difficulties which required extra support and her mother stated, "I think her pre-natal [experience]; things that happened *in utero* probably has affected the way she's developed" (C3_P2). Similarly, ***Sita*** and ***Melanie's*** previous traumatic experience resulted in significant language, learning and or social difficulties at school (C6_P1; C6_P2; C10_P). Rick's previous experience resulted in anxieties which led to physical illness and misunderstandings concerning his behaviour at school (C5_P1; C5_P2). (See also: *Evidence of trauma and neglect*.)

Significantly, however, all parents of children adopted at or under the age of two also identified either occasional anxiety tendencies attributed to the "adoption journey" (C1_P2) or learning difficulties in at least one of their children. For example, ***Richard, Sarah*** and ***Matthew*** experienced significant expectant anxiety

(Sapolsky, 2004) in relation to school camps (C1_P2; C2_P2). Also, while still living in her birth country, ***Marlena's*** parents were informed by "a special therapist … that there was some significant delays that needed to be assessed properly" and consultation with a university psychology department has occurred since arriving in Australia (C4_P2). (See also: *Anxiety-related behaviours; Transition to school;* and *Academic experiences*.)

Evidence of trauma and neglect

In accordance with the research suggesting all intercountry adoptees have experienced trauma in varying degrees (for example, Becker-Weidman, 2009b), three children in this study experienced significant pre-adoption adversity which impacted on their adjustment to family life and school. ***Rick*** witnessed frightening events which occurred due to the civil unrest in his birth country:

> He was only two when the rebels broke in and they lined all the nuns and the kids up around the walls. And they had AK47s. They were going to shoot them all. So you can imagine 150 kids; the noise of the rebels shouting instructions; probably the nuns screaming …"
> (C5_P2; as explained to Renee by the orphanage Mother Superior)

"A very sick little boy", when they met him, "[Rick] had malaria and an eye infection" and was medicated for malaria with "drugs that were for adults and far too strong for him" (Doc_13). His mother wondered about the extent to which earlier abuse had stayed with Rick long after the events.

> Unfortunately, in the institution, the orphanage, he was [also] physically abused. And there was obviously a lot of noise around. He has a problem with people shouting at him. And he has absolutely very little trust in people. It's getting better now, of course, but initially he was afraid of people and it was like, "Keep your distance from me. Don't touch me. Don't come past this line" (C5_P2).

Rick's reservation and mistrust of unfamiliar people had implications for his transition to school. His frequent state of anxiety triggered by shouting and/or anger affected relationships with teachers resulting in ongoing behavioural issues and conflict.

Sita was found, malnourished and alone on the streets by a government welfare authority official, at an estimated (though possibly understated) age of 3½ to 4 years

(Doc_24). According to her mother, "She was in a really bad state when they found her. She had an infestation of scabies [and] bronchitis. So she'd been there for a while**"** (C6_P2). After a period of hospitalisation she was taken to an orphanage where she stayed for three years until her adoption. Sita has a "strong fear of male doctors or male figures of authority in particular", and extensive pre-adoption testing may have contributed to this fear of male professionals (C6_P1; C6_P2). There was also a "strong suspicion" of abuse while living at the orphanage. Sita still has a phobia about using public toilets or toilets with black seats (C6_P2). She experiences difficulty when separating from her parents and has "discrete periods of intense fear" and "recurrent, distressing recollections of past difficult events". She also has significant attention difficulties (Doc_25). At age 7, Sita had underdeveloped jaw and mouth muscles and was unable to chew food or maintain eye contact (Doc_25; Doc_24). She could speak in "grammatically correct sentences of four-five words" in her native language, but her English language was limited to a few commonly used phrases (Doc_21).

At the orphanage, Sita was medicated (for approximately three years) to counter the impact of post-traumatic stress. Certain medications were given to "help her sleep". These included two different types of anti-depressants, later discovered to be incompatible and unsuitable for children (C6_P2). Once in Australia, her parents, with medical help, began a process of "wean[ing] her off" the medications over a six month period by means of natural alternatives designed to "keep her lifted up so that she wasn't going to go off the rails or just crash" (C6_P2). This process was still occurring when Sita commenced school in Australia. Sita is a young girl with high support needs. While her transition to school was well managed, her language and learning needs were not well catered for, and her younger emotional age and inability to communicate effectively left her socially isolated and withdrawn.

Melanie was born prematurely, abandoned at birth, and spent the first three months of her life in a hospital until she was taken to an orphanage. Janet described the orphanage as "a terrible place", and while on a return "homeland" visit, both she and Melanie witnessed children there being violently beaten: "We could see a doorway and this guy with an electric cord really giving it to this kid. … We could hear the kids screaming" (C10_P). According to Janet, Melanie only tentatively recalled being beaten at the orphanage.

Janet described Melanie in their first few days together as a "traumatised, injured, [and] unprepared" child. Melanie experienced ongoing and significant challenges adjusting to her new life and surroundings in Australia, including communication, toileting, bathing and diet. Sensory overload often affected Melanie which made a visit to places like shopping centres extremely challenging.

> [The] trolleys, music, lights, it was too much. And so much stuff. She's not used to that. … [In her birth country] the foster mother catches fish every day for dinner … and they grow their own vegetables. And it is very quiet. It's just in the middle of nowhere. … When she first came here it was like, "Noisy, noisy, noisy, noisy" (C10_P).

Melanie was also very anxious about being separated from her new parents. To her, putting on shoes or picking up a handbag signalled leaving home, which was more than she could cope with. "I think it was probably two months or so that I wasn't able to leave the house really. I couldn't go to the shops. I had to go barefoot to the shops. I had to just carry cash" (C8_P). When Janet's husband put the rubbish out for collection, Melanie became highly distressed because "we weren't all, the three of us, together at the same time". Three years later, at the time of interview, these challenges had persisted. Melanie was still experiencing night fears resulting in anxiety-related toileting problems. Recurring nightmares, fears about snakes in the toilet, and memories of being beaten by her foster mother for wetting herself could leave her "huddled in the corner … so scared that we are going to do something [similar]. She's really petrified" (C8_P). Such problems bring constant challenges for the family. Rick, Sita and Melanie, all adopted over the age of three years, clearly had early adverse experiences which continued to impact on them at home and school. Such physical, behavioural, social and emotional responses to trauma and early deprivation have been well documented in the literature (see Chapter 3).

Several other cases highlighted anxieties which are not always obvious at school and which may affect children who had been adopted at a young age. ***Amaris,*** for example, experienced anxiety at night time, which can be a common experience for post-institutionalised children for months or even years after adoption (Gribble, 2015):

> She'd be in bed and have the blanket over her and she'd freak out because there were lumps in the blankets and I had to explain to her that those lumps

> are your legs and we can't do anything to flatten that. So little things like that she would get really, really stressed about (C9_P).

Amaris is much more relaxed now, but continues to display "perfectionist tendencies" (C9_P), possibly as a residual manifestation of pre-adoption experience (Federici, 1998; Gindis, 2008; Hoksbergen et al., 2005; Rutter, Colvert et al., 2007). Deborah described the anxiety which may prevail in younger adoptees as "emotional triggers, fear of rejection … the anxiety that they bring, which is part of their adoption journey" rather than something which can be attributed to a specific pre-adoption experience (C1_P2). While the literature confirms that children adopted at a young age generally adapt very well after a short period of time in their adoptive families (Rutter, 1998; Brodzinsky et al., 1998; Gunnar et al., 2000; McGuinness, et al., 2000), Grace urged teachers:

> [J]ust to be aware that they do have those anxiety issues. I think a lot of people think "Oh, they were a baby. They've settled. The kids settle easily. They get over it. They can't remember." … Well, they may not consciously remember, but something in their subconscious remembers the traumas. I don't think teachers and people in general are aware of that … (C2_P).

Leonie described her shock when her daughter Eva (adopted at approximately 2 years of age) remembered her early life experience:

> [She] stood up when she was three, pointed to a World Vision Ad and said, "That was us", and I was like, "Who said that to my kid?" And then I realised, no, she just remembered. … You ask Eva about going back to [birth country] permanently. You couldn't drag her back (C7_P).

Known versus unknown histories

This study revealed that some parents are provided with, or manage to piece together, a substantial amount of information about their child's pre-adoption history which may help them to understand their children's needs and to seek appropriate external support (for example, counselling, tutoring, occupational therapy, paediatric or speech assessments). This knowledge may assist parents to maintain realistic expectations concerning a child's development, achievement at school and behaviour. Leonie, for example, described her older child's "considerable [physical] damage" as a result of "multiple abandonments, [by birth parents], starvation [and] traumatic pregnancy" and stated, "I'm always very careful not to push too hard"

(C7_P). It is therefore logical that teachers could also benefit from understanding relevant information about a child's background, including health issues, when considering school programming and adjustments. As Leonie stated, "History affects everything and I think we're very foolish if we don't see that" (C7_P).

Sienna's parents were provided with a "really comprehensive medical history" which indicated a strong possibility of pre-natal substance abuse by her birth parents. This helped both parents to understand her early health problems and ongoing learning difficulties at school (C3_P1; C3_P2). Having this information facilitated the involvement of learning support staff from the first enrolment interview at school and the development of a suitable transition plan (C3_P1; C3_P2; Doc_5). Joanne commented, "We had so much paperwork", and Peter added:

> We had school reports … amazing … really, really detailed. And in that it mentioned how she was getting speech therapy support and a lot of other help as well … they'd had health assessments done. She was having that done regularly, probably 12-18 months prior to us getting her. … [The school] really wanted to accommodate (C3_P1).

This study aligns with research reporting that all adoptees have experienced some form of trauma. However, it also provides evidence suggesting that the school experience can become positive and worthwhile for both younger and older adoptees and their families when parents and educators gain an understanding of trauma and its consequences and communicate effectively and put appropriate supports in place. However, this may not always be a straightforward or simple process.

For example, ***Sita's*** parents had extensive paperwork but "there was a lot of contradiction … even in her file" concerning the assessment of Sita's capabilities, which led her parents to doubt the accuracy of the information (C6_P2). In her birth country, a pre-adoption clinical report on Sita's capabilities and apparent learning difficulties described severe attachment difficulties, aggression towards other children and attention-seeking behaviours, and her speech was assessed as equivalent to that of a 2-3 year old (Doc_20). A Psychometric Assessment suggested an IQ of 53; however, "prolonged interaction with her [did] not create the impression of low IQ". A subsequent report (approximately five months later) noted improvement since participating at the special school in "her capacity to perceive and absorb new information … to retain and recall it appropriately, at her given level, indicat[ing] the

possibility that she is currently functioning at the borderline level of intellectual capacity" (Doc_21).

In spite of a great deal of information provided to the school, other issues, such as insufficient access to trained support teachers in a small rural state school, the inadequacy of psychometric testing of ESL/ESFL learners, and year level placement and progression issues for children with lower social/emotional age and cognitive ability, were all barriers to this young girl's progress within a mainstream school (C6_P1; C6_P2).

Some adoptive parents may have little or no information available to them, particularly in cases where children had been abandoned. Missing information such as birth date and family history pervade many important areas in life and at school, including decisions about age/year level placement, extra-curricular events organised according to age, and curriculum activities pertaining to knowledge of family history or genetics. ***Amaris***, for example, was found at night in the pouring rain in a dry river bed by a passer-by. She was approximately 16 months old. Diane has no known birth information; however, as a professional maternal and child health worker, she has been able to determine probable causes of her daughter's health and developmental delays:

> I don't know any of her family history, but looking at her size and her health status, I would say - and [birth country] being a fourth world country - that the probability is that she was malnourished *in utero* and possibly premi as well, because of health issues she'd had (C9_P).

Lack of information about prior experiences or health issues can make it more difficult for parents to explain their child's background and for schools to identify learning needs and provide appropriate support.

Pre-adoption care arrangements

Niemann and Weiss (2011) confirm that consistency of care and low stress levels contribute to a child's overall sense of security and ability to form future secure attachments. Prior to adoption, the children in this study experienced one or more care arrangements which included hospitalization, a period of time with birth parents or other relatives, time in an orphanage, foster care, or a combination of these. Some experiences while living in these settings were positive, while others left an ongoing legacy of adjustment difficulties, fear and anxiety. Variations in pre-

adoption care arrangements also offered very different attachment opportunities to a primary care-giver. All children experienced attachment disruption as a necessary outcome of adoption.

Some children had the positive experience of living in a supportive foster family for a significant period of time. ***Sienna*** "had fantastic foster parents", who were able to take care of her basic needs (C3_P1; C2_P2). ***Sarah*** had formed a close bond with her foster mother and was very distressed at being taken from her (C2_P). ***Andrea*** lived in a small orphanage, where the workers took the babies on many outings, including to the beach and to local fairs (C1_P2). In contrast, other children experienced very different conditions. ***Matthew*** lived in an institutional setting where "they did not leave the grounds, or the room. They very rarely even went outside to play. So his world was pretty narrow" (C1_P2). ***Richard*** was relinquished at two days old, going directly from the hospital in which he was born to an orphanage where he did not form a special bond with any particular adult, and did not cope well with sharing the care workers with other children (C2_P). ***Joseph*** lived with his grandparents and then with other family members for a year. According to Leonie, "He had some really rough times with his grandparents; really, really rough … he was going backwards.… his behaviour was out of control. He was being raised by elderly people who couldn't cope" (C7_P).

From age six months, ***Melanie*** was with a foster family until she was adopted, making regular return visits to the orphanage which managed her foster placement. Janet described Melanie's treatment by her foster family as a "Cinderella" type of upbringing, being "the one who had to do all the work" (which was culturally typical of the youngest child), while often being excluded from activities because "she wasn't really part of the family" (C10_P). Melanie's drawings (for her mother) confirmed her confusion about the "mothers" in her life: her birth mother she never knew; her social worker from the orphanage who brought clothes and food for her to the foster family; her foster mother; and now Janet, her legal adoptive mother (C10_P).

Amaris's case is an atypical experience in international adoption where positive and close attachments were formed with the adoptive mother shortly after abandonment and during a short period of institutionalisation. After abandonment, and failed attempts to find her birth family, an overseas child protection unit took

Amaris to the local orphanage. There she quickly bonded with Diane who was working as a volunteer. Diane described the initial attachment relationship:

> [She] was just so withdrawn, overwhelmed. … She'd do the whole silent cry thing. I'd leave the room and she would be really distressed. ... So she just kind of attached herself to me and that was that (C9_P).

The care arrangements made for intercountry adoptees in their birth country vary and, in many cases, the impact of this is difficult to measure (Johnson, 2000). In some cases, this may have even more impact on child development than age at adoption (Howe, 1997). As a result, attachment opportunities also vary. While some form close attachments to foster parents, this brief but significant bond is necessarily severed by their permanent placement in an adoptive family. For those raised for an extended period in an institutionalised setting, where staff-to-children ratios often dissuade loving, close relationships, many will not have benefited from early secure attachments, or learned the social skills normally developed in a family context (Meese, 2002). This can have important implications for school and other social settings.

Anxiety-related behaviours

Parents identified anxiety-related behaviours and "survival skills" which impact on home and school as residual factors resulting from their children's pre-adoption experience and post-adoption adjustment. Extreme behaviours were more evident in children who were adopted over the age of three. These included responses to shouting, physical conditions, "autistic-like" and sensory overload tendencies (see Gindis, 2008; Hoksbergen et al., 2005; Rutter, Colvert et al., 2007).

Response to shouting

Renee and Cooper emphasised that ***Rick*** became very anxious when shouted at and this would often result in unproductive relationships with his teachers. Renee explained that at the beginning of every year she meets with teachers to request, "Please don't shout at him because you really will lose him". Renee elaborated that once Rick is shouted at by a teacher he "brings the barriers down … then becomes disruptive and that's his retaliation" (C5_P2; C5_P1). When asked if there is anything he doesn't like about school, Rick replied, "Teachers yelling at me" (C5_Ch). It was clear that being yelled at was a significant concern for Rick as he recalled the precise number of times he had been yelled at in the previous three

years: “They’ve yelled at me this year, a teacher’s yelled at me three times. Last year the teacher yelled at me twice and the last year [previous] a teacher yelled at me only once” (C5_Ch). When asked how he feels when a teacher yells at him, he replied:

> I just get a guilty feeling in me, when they yell at me. Sometimes I try to ignore them but it’s quite hard because you get a guilty feeling in yourself and they yell at you and you don’t actually feel that school is a fun place – a good environment (C5_Ch).

Physical conditions

Testament to ***Rick’s*** anxiety was his physical and emotional reactions to going to school. Renee explained that Rick had been treated by an optometrist for muscle tension in the eyes causing vision problems. The optometrist suggested that his condition could be the result of being bullied at school. A general practitioner treated Rick for vomiting and diarrhoea following an in-school suspension. Renee noted that both practitioners confirmed the likelihood that symptoms resulted from chronic anxiety (C5_P2). Renee stated, “In Year One, he was hiding behind furniture, screaming” before going to school. At the time of interview, Rick was generally happy to go to school, although he occasionally felt sick and would not eat when he is anxious about going. Rick confirmed his anxiety through his drawing, in Figure 6.3, using colours to emphasise his emotions.

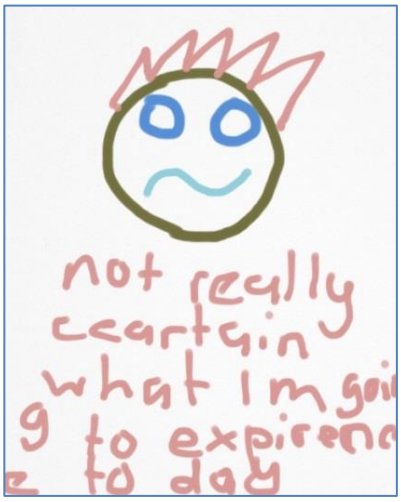


Figure 6.3. An unhappy or worrying moment at school

Rick (age 10)

Rick: “I’m not really certain what’s going to happen so I’ve done an anxious face. The hair colour would be pink because I wouldn’t really be certain about it because it is half/half. Blue just means, is it going to be good [or] is it going to be bad? Light blue would be is it going to be good? And that’s it. The black [outline means] – is it going to be the worst day of my life?

"Autistic-like" tendencies

Post-institutional "autistic-like" behaviours have been well documented in the literature (Federici, 1998; Gindis, 2008; Hoksbergen et al., 2005; Rutter, Colvert et al., 2007). Whether or not these types of labels are helpful in understanding certain behaviours is debatable. Both ***Sita's*** and ***Melanie's*** experiences provide examples of behaviours that can often be misunderstood. Lana confirmed that Sita "functions better with structure". In the classroom, she works best in "quiet environments" (C6_P2). In her special school class, she is one of seven children, which works well. While Sita's anxiety-related behaviours are gradually reducing, her father explained:

> Sometimes she's a little bit ASD. When she first got here, if she had the slightest thread, [she'd say]: "What is that, Dad? What is that?" and we'd have to get the scissors and cut that little thread off then (C6_P1).

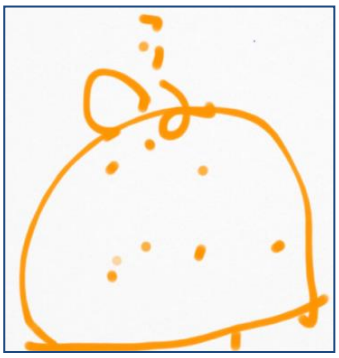


Figure 6.4. Own choice: Toilet seats

Sita (age 10)

Sita's inability to communicate caused her anxiety for quite some time. In both schools and in social situations, she would "do an escape; she would constantly ask to go to the toilet, because then they would walk her to the toilet and then it was just like sit, relief, time out" (C6_P2). This would occur up to five times in one hour as an avoidance strategy. Sita's drawing in Figure 6.4 confirmed her pre-occupation with toilets. While completing her "Own choice" drawing on an iPad, Sita said: "I can do toilet. Mr G's toilet had a old toilet. White toilet, should be like this, white." When asked when she would go there, she replied: "Just to sit … go a lot. Yeah." This is something Sita continued to do when she needed time out (C6_Ch).

Sensory overload

Melanie found the sensory stimulus of both classroom and playground very challenging. She struggled with noisy classrooms and with the constant blowing of whistles used in the playground to maintain order:

> They use a whistle all the time. It's very military style in the playground. Then the teacher blows whistles and everyone's blowing whistles. I said to her [the teacher] it's very hard for her. She comes home and says, "Mum, it's

> very noisy, noisy, noisy, noisy" and she would blow [demonstrates a whistle blowing]. She found it very hard at first (C10_P).

Melanie's ongoing anxiety was also manifested in her numerous daily trips to the toilet, often during class time. This caused significant issues at school and led to the school requesting her parents to obtain medical advice and intervention for urinary incontinence. Melanie received paediatric treatment and the school was advised that Melanie's condition "will take time as past habits and behaviours need to be unlearnt and new behaviours and habits need to be learnt" (Doc_27). An Occupational Therapist who visited the school advised the family that Melanie's problem was due to a "sensory disorder as well as stress and anxiety" (Doc_29), which Janet reported to the class teacher. However, the Year One teacher still had concerns that Melanie's excessive toilet trips would disrupt the established "buddy system" within the class. Despite Melanie's efforts to be "a lovely, polite, well-mannered girl" at school, she struggled to "hold it all together" and tended to "fall apart" at home (C10_P).

> It's very stressful, trying to keep it together. And of course, the first year, running to the toilet all the time, and all that and you know people would go, "Oh, why are you running to the toilet?" and she wets her pants, doesn't make it on time. Teachers say, "No, you can't go". She wets her pants in the classroom. Awful. And then she's got to sit all day in wet pants (C10_P).

Before Melanie leaves for school and when she arrives home, "she goes back to being a two year old, or a baby", demonstrating "aggressive, violent behaviour, because it's just overwhelming for her.… She's not able to keep it together. She's not coping during the day." On their way home from school, Melanie "spins all the way home" walking in circles and once home will often place her or her mother's fist in her mouth "with a complete glazed look on her face.… She's just checked out". After seeking professional advice about these behaviours, Janet now understands that these are strategies Melanie uses to cope with "sensory overload" and her condition should be considered similar to "post-traumatic stress" (C10_P).

Some children in this study demonstrated no obvious ongoing anxiety concerns. For example, ***Andrea*** demonstrated an outgoing and talkative disposition and her previous experience had no obvious impact on her at school. Deborah stated, "She's a social butterfly. She just [takes] it all in her stride" (C1_P2). Others

experienced less obvious forms of anxiety. These were often difficult to explain and not always understood by teachers. These behaviours included managing extreme levels of anger (mostly at home, but sometimes at school) and concerns about family permanence.

Anger management

Karen explained that ***Brendon*** "explodes more at home" and has been in trouble at school for "kicking big boys". ***Marlena*** "holds it all together for school" (C4_P2) but lashes out at home, "spitting, biting, screaming, punching, scratching, kicking, pulling hair, shaking" (C4_P1; C4_P2).

Family permanence

Grace identified instances that have caused one or both of her children anxiety at school. She argued that ***Richard's*** anxiety was often related to his concerns about family permanence: "He's always worried, are we going to be there?" at the end of the day. Both children become anxious about being separated from each other or other members of the family, such as on school camps. (See also ***Matthew's*** experience in Section 6.6.3, Sub-section: Transition to school.)

Teacher understanding

A lack of teacher understanding and dismissiveness about ongoing anxiety, particularly for children who have been with their families from a young age, was Grace's main concern:

> You try to tell them about it and they just dismiss you …. I was trying to tell [Richard's teacher] about his anxiety - Sarah had gone to camp and he was upset that she was away at camp. I was trying to explain to her "that's his anxiety; that she's gone away; he's not sure what's happening," and she's like, "Oh, yes, all kids are like that." And I thought, "Well, no, he - most kids probably are a bit like that - but his is just a little bit deeper because of his background" (CS2_P).

In a similar situation, Deborah described the need to stress the significance of her son's anxiety to a Year Six Camp Co-ordinator:

> Year Six camp was his first camp and I spoke to the Year Six camp co-ordinator. I said he'll be a bit anxious. I thought afterwards that I don't really think he gets what I quite mean, so I went back and I said, "You know how I said the other day … I just want you to understand that I'm not being a

> neurotic mother. I probably didn't take the time to explain properly. I'm not talking here about just being homesick. I'm talking that while he's at camp he's going to be thinking that we've either died or that we've moved and haven't bothered to tell him". I'm glad I did [have the extra conversation] because the camp co-ordinator's immediate response was, "Oh, my gosh, OK" (C1_P2).

While on camp, Deborah said the teachers "were great", ensuring he was in a group with his own teacher, and allowing him a reassuring phone call home when necessary. Subsequently, he was "fine for the rest of camp. So they really listened and understood" (C1_P2). Deborah also recalled a recent conversation with the school deputy principal prior to her son's flight to Canberra on the Year Seven school trip. She explained Matthew's anxiety to the deputy principal who acknowledged: "That's pretty intense isn't it …. It's slightly different to homesickness" (C1_P2).

Grace (C2_P) and Deborah (C1_P2) provided other isolated examples of their children's level of anxiety being "dismissed" by teachers. Grace was also concerned that the children may be ignored by teachers if they tried to explain how they were feeling: "I think they automatically treat you like that, but do they treat the kid the same way?" Grace again emphasised a common misconception that children who are adopted at a young age are sufficiently resilient to overcome the negative outcomes of early trauma, attachment disruption and ongoing fears about loss and rejection:

> Sure they are resilient and they have adapted, but that doesn't mean they have left everything behind. They have been rejected. To them, they have been rejected. They know they have been rejected. Are they going to be rejected again? It's there, at some point (C2_P).

This study highlighted the significance of ongoing anxiety experienced by some intercountry adoptees, which is generally more obvious in children adopted at an older age than younger. Nevertheless, anxiety is a condition that may affect these children and their behaviour at various ages and on different occasions at school. Open communication with parents and understanding of this condition may help the children to cope better at home and school.

Transition to school

Pre-adoption experience, age at adoption and length of time in Australia had an impact on adoptees' readiness for formal education and on their transition to school. In most cases, children adopted at a younger age who had spent several years in Australia tended to have fewer difficulties. Parents of older adoptees played a more significant role in the children's transition to school.

School readiness

Grace explained that ***Sarah*** had no difficulties starting school and "was ready to be there" following her previous Kindergarten experience. ***Richard*** had some problems settling at kindergarten, but "by the time he got to Prep, he was fine" (C2_P). ***Andrea*** "took it all in her stride – she's a social butterfly", who confidently asked her mother from the outset, "Can I walk to school by myself?" (C1_P2). In contrast, her brother ***Matthew*** experienced separation anxiety and had difficulty with change:

> Being our little anxious bunny, he doesn't cope well with change. He's getting better as he's getting older, but he hasn't coped well with change. So what we would do and still do is we will talk a lot about what's going to happen, how that will happen … we would have a routine and we would religiously stick to that routine. He was pretty good. It worked for the most part pretty well. But if that routine changed slightly it was very difficult for him. He didn't cope very well (C1_P2).

Brendon and ***Marlena*** had lived in their birth country with their adoptive family since they were seven months old, but arrived in Australia just prior to starting school. Brendon, placed in Year Two, "was particularly very, very nervous" and wanted his mother Karen to stay with him. Brendon's teacher was "very open to have me there as he needed" on the provision that she would exit the classroom as soon as possible. After two mornings, Karen no longer needed to stay, but shared some adjustment concerns with the ESL teacher at the school. This teacher then visited with Brendon every day to "build that relationship" of support (C4_P2). Marlena, starting Year One, was a little nervous, but she "responds really well to sweet personalities and her teacher is just a real sweet kind of lady" (C4_P1). While a "bit more clingy that week… she loved it. No problem at all for her" (C4_P2;

C4_P1). After six months of school, Karen was "dropping them off at the kiss-and-drop rather than walking them to their classrooms" (C4_P2).

Joseph generally coped and achieved well at school in his birth country (C7_P) and the timing of his arrival in Australia was fortuitous, allowing him 10 months at home with his family before starting in the Prep year at school at the correct age. Leonie argued that attachment and bonding work was more important than starting school straight away. She said, "I'm his mummy, and if he doesn't know I'm his mummy, he's going to get lost. He would be having emotional issues at school." "Now", she added, "he's not. He's just having normal issues" (C7_P). While Leonie described their school as "unbelievable" and his transition as "seamless" (C7_P) due to the school's excellent preparation to receive him 10 months after his arrival in the country, Joseph nonetheless expressed his initial anxiety at starting school, largely due to his lack of English language skills (C7_Ch2). His brother ***Germaine*** agreed: "Probably starting at school was hard. Getting used to school was hard. It was OK for me" (C7_Ch1).

Joseph drew a picture (Figure 6.5) and talked about his first day at school in Australia. He started with a smiley face. He then started again to show the anxiety on his face. He said, "I was nervous and freaked out. Just for about three days. I was shocked and – that's me going, 'What! What's going on?' The first day I was back I could speak a little bit of English. Not too much. I was like, 'What your name?' I said to mum, 'I'm nervous'. [She said] 'You should just relax'. [It took] about one week" (C7_Ch2).

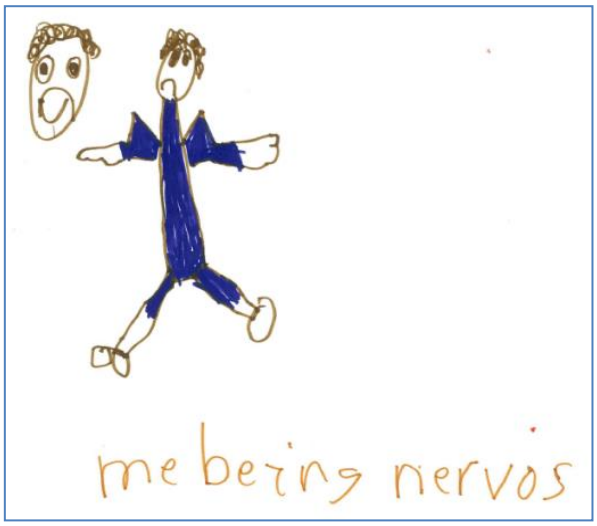


Figure 6.5. A worrying moment at school: First day of school

Joseph (age 7)

This study's findings align with research which confirms the importance of the teacher to student success and achievement (Hattie, 2003, 2008, 20012; Hamre &

Pianta, 2001). It also suggests that appropriate age/year level placement is vital to school-age adoptees and parent participation in the transition process warrants particular consideration. These issues merit further discussion.

The importance of the teacher

This study shows that the teacher in particular makes a difference to traumatised children as they transition to school. For example, ***Rick's*** pre-adoption experience had a significant impact on him as he commenced Kindergarten but the way in which the teacher responded to him allowed him to ease into the school environment unthreatened. Renee prepared the teacher by explaining:

> "He won't warm to you straight away, not like the other little children may do". His pre-prep teacher was wonderful. She was very good. She was fantastic. But he was still, "Hands off. Don't touch me." But he was okay with her; he wasn't afraid of her, but still "Keep your distance." But from there on, there hasn't really been anybody that he's warmed to at all (C5_P2).

Rick's parents attributed this initial success to the teacher's nurturing personality and her well-developed relationships with all the children: "Oh, they all loved her, adored her" (C5_P2).

> She was different … she actually felt really proud that she was Rick's first teacher. We have seen her out of school and she still comes up to him and gives him a hug. But, see, that's the difference.… She didn't treat him differently.… She had 20 other kids that she loved as well (C5_P1).

Parent participation

When children join their families at or after school commencement age, more creative and flexible approaches may be needed for an effective transition to school. Findings of this study suggest that parent involvement for school-age adoptees is a priority.

Sita's parents strategically and sensitively transitioned Sita into the country, their home and her first school in Australia. Her initial sense of belonging in a small rural school involved the whole school and her family's participation. "We tried to put ourselves in her shoes – what would she need? … A seven year old who may have been a nine year old" (C6_P2). Prior to starting her in school, without Sita present, John explained that he:

> put a whole package together and went down with a usb stick and sat the whole school [principal, class teacher and approximately 50 children] down to educate them on Sita's background and what [her birth country] was like and where she came from. … I had the map of [birth country] and showed them the size, the population … the photos … video … statistics. … At the end they had to stop the questions because the kids had so many questions (C6_P1).

According to John, the class teacher suggested this was "the best preparation the school could have had", helping the children to understand more about Sita's background. "They almost became a bit protective of her. She was a little star … I think they were just a bit intrigued" (C6_P2). The school initially consisted of three composite classes (Prep-2, Years 3-5, Years 6-7). Sita's transition to the Prep-2 class was slow, observing first, then attending two half-days per week. Her parents initially stayed with her, slowly withdrawing as her attendance time increased.

Joanne and Peter transitioned two school-age children to school. They enrolled their first child ***Mary***, adopted at 4½ years, in "a little Catholic school" because it was "very multicultural" and there was "an adopted family there already" from Mary's birth country. However, they withdrew her after one day. Joanne explained:

> The teacher was very young and inexperienced. I went along with the idea that I'm just in the background. So I stayed in the cupboard the whole day cleaning the cupboards, tidying up in there, and watched what was going on. The thing that really got me was the outside play time. They put out four hula hoops and told the kids to go out and play. No structured play, no supervision. And Mary went and played in the dirt with a stick. She would have done that in [birth country] (C3_P2).

Transitioning both girls to the second school of choice began with an interview with the principal. ***Sienna*** had attended and enjoyed school in her birth country; however, adoption regulations strongly recommend that a child spend up to a year at home with their new family for the purpose of attachment and bonding (Queensland Government, 2009). Joanne outlined in a Transition Plan (Doc_6) (which the parents devised and negotiated with the school principal and teacher) that they wanted Sienna to attend school because she needed:

- age appropriate social interaction and friendships to assist with social, emotional and language development;
- to become familiar with school procedures, teachers, expectations so that it will not be overwhelming when she goes full time
- to build on her positive schooling experience in (birth country) (Doc_6).

The Transition Plan involved a gradual reduction in Joanne's participation in school alongside her daughter, over the course of the first year (Doc_6). This plan was approved by Adoption and Specialist Support Services, (DCCSDS). Joanne explained:

> Because we'd had the past experience with Mary … I made it from the point of view that I have to be there. I explained that the Department insists that I keep this child home for a year. She's of school age. They would require that I keep her home, but socially, she wants to be here, but the only way we can make this work is if I come. And I just said, well that's just what's got to happen (C3_P2).

Peter and Joanne conceded that they may have had an advantage in obtaining the principal's agreement to Joanne's requests because she was a teacher (C3_P1) and could talk "educational speak" in relation to the children's language, learning and attachment needs (C3_P2).

Initial age/year level placement

Joanne said they were treated as if they "were the experts" and "had a good relationship because we'd had that really good teacher before, with Mary" (C3_P2) and their older first child is currently "coping really well" at school (C3_P2). Joanne understood that being 6½ years old, Sienna was required to start school in Grade One:

> [they] couldn't leave her in Prep, which would have been great. She's even a bit older for the class she's in now. So she could have been nearly two years behind. And if you give them the support, a lot of additional support, hopefully she'll catch up. But it takes seven or eight years to catch up. Each kid is different (C3_P2).

Both girls enjoyed school and transitioned well with this co-operative approach between home and school. Sienna recalled her mother's participation in school: "When I was in Grade One, I was with my mum at school …. I didn't do anything

and I got bored and I fell asleep" (C3_Ch2). When asked if she liked having her mum at school, and what did she like about it, she added:

> Yes. She can explain, like mum can explain words like it's telling you to do, like, "How much of the money, and the shop keeper do with the money", like explains what it's telling you so you can understand. And you can do it well when you get used to doing that. You get explained by like a teacher and tell you what it want you to do (C3_Ch2).

Joanne's individualised support of her daughter in class during the first year of school assisted Sienna's comprehension of written text and teacher explanations to a whole group. Sienna said, "Well they don't really explain it properly.… I wanted mum to be the Year Three one" (Learning Support Teacher) (C3_Ch2).

Melanie's story is in stark contrast to ***Sienna's*** despite both girls being a similar age at adoption and needing significant support at school. Janet explained to the first school principal, "This child has no English whatsoever" and would benefit from commencing school in the prep year; however, due to her age (7), this was not permitted. Hence, in term 4, 2012, Melanie transitioned into the school, two hours per day, three days per week, in a Year One class, increasing to full-time attendance in the last two weeks of school. Melanie was constantly "confused and uncertain" due to her lack of English language skills and the taunts of other children. She was advised that her daughter would be expected to move into Year Two in 2013 with same-age peers and would not be able to complete Year One from the beginning. According to Janet, this was justified by the school administration with reference to research which outlines the negative outcomes of grade retention. Janet reported, "[The school] said that if I kept her back a year she would end up with mental problem[s] and probably in jail" (C10_P).

Janet sought the assistance of AdSSS. A letter to the school principal stated, "[Melanie] has had a traumatic early childhood characterised by institutionalised care, multiple caregivers and instability within her pre-adoptive care environment" (Doc_30). The letter explained that the extenuating background circumstances experienced by children in Melanie's situation need to be taken into consideration when determining age/grade placement. These included insecure attachments; challenging behaviours; the likelihood of previous experience of "trauma, maltreatment and /or neglect" in the early years; higher risk of learning difficulties or

delays requiring additional support in school; poor language proficiency; "irregular access to formal learning … [and] delayed emotional and social development" (Doc_30). AdSSS also requested ongoing involvement in the planning of Melanie's education program at school. It was when the school determined that Melanie was still required to commence the following year in Year Two that her parents made the decision to find a school where she could be enrolled in Year One.

A very different process was evident when ***Brendon*** and ***Marlena*** commenced schooling in Australia. Although both children were aged 7½, Brendon was placed in a Year Two class and Marlena was placed in Year One, in a non-denominational, private Christian school. Their parents explained:

> **Brett:** [Marlena] just wasn't ready.
> **Karen:** There was no possibility she could go over to Grade Two.
> **Brett:** She couldn't have gone into Grade Two.
> **Karen:** And it wouldn't have benefited Brendon to be kept back, so …
> (C4_P1; C4_P2)

The school principal was empathetic towards the children's individual needs as a result of his own experience as an adoptive parent of a child from a third world country (C4_P2; Doc_12). Karen explained:

> The principal was very understanding about the children needing to be placed in different grades. We didn't need to provide a letter or evidence.… We did not need to provide previous school reports for the children, though we did provide Marlena's speech pathologist's report that she got in [birth country] (C4_P2).

This study revealed that discrepancies exist for school-age adoptees regarding transition to school. The research shows the importance of appropriate commencement age and year level progression of children for both social and emotional reasons and long term literacy outcomes (Huang, 2014; Huang & Invernizzi, 2012; D. Martin, 2011; Meisels & Liaw, 1993; Morrison & Ieong On No, 2007; Oshima & Domaleski, 2006). However, attachment opportunity is also prioritised in research and mandated by adoption authorities (Queensland Government, 2009; DHS, 2016). This can lead to stress on the family, as they strive to accommodate both educational and adoption requirements, while also considering their new child's individual needs. One case highlighted the benefits from a parent's

attendance and support of their child at school. However, this may not always be possible or desirable. When school administrators are aware of the individual child's background as well as their attachment, academic and social/emotional needs, an appropriate and flexible, individualised transition plan may be negotiated. Starting school can be a daunting prospect for many children. For the older intercountry adoptee, this is not just due to separation anxiety (although, for some, this is significant), but may also be a result of having to navigate language barriers and cultural and social differences.

6.5.2 Social constructionism and the school

This study has shown that attachment and trauma theory provides insights into divergent developmental trajectories for intercountry adoptees who have experienced disrupted attachments and trauma early in life. More recent sociocultural discourse has expanded teachers' professional learning by analysing the importance of culture (students', teachers' and school culture), particularly in the early years of schooling (Edwards, 2007; see also Chapter Three). The following section offers a reflective and critical stance on the research questions through examination and analysis of five of the major themes: i) transitions between year levels, teachers and schools; ii) academic experiences; iii) social and emotional experiences; iv) racial and cultural experiences, and v) teachers and school administrators.

Transitions between year levels, teachers and schools

Children adopted at two years of age or under

Generally, the children who were adopted by age two were positive about resuming school after a holiday, looking forward to new classes, subjects and teachers. For example, when asked "Do you like school?" ***Matthew*** replied, "Yes. It's fun. When we're not doing anything on the holidays, it's really boring. So I'd rather do school work" (C1_Ch1). ***Sarah*** also liked school and explained what she liked the most was, "meeting other people and friends from different cultures" (C2_Ch1). Leonie had developed a positive relationship with her children's school over the course of adopting several children and, following a period of home schooling, she stated, "They just fell back in. No problems.… School was great" (C7_P).

For others, however, the transition to a new class sometimes caused anxiety which can be linked directly to the adoption experience. Concerned about the reaction of children new to her class regarding her adoptive status, ***Sarah*** reported she often feels "uncomfortable" with children who

> don't really know about me … they think I'm a normal family.… When they come into the class, they just look around feeling that everybody's the same as them, but it feels a bit weird because I'm the only person in the whole entire class who's adopted. [I] feel a bit nervous when anybody asks me questions. But I answer them to make them understand more about me (C2_Ch1).

Matthew suffered separation anxiety from Year Two to Year Four. His mother stated, "Year Two was a bit of a nightmare separating. I regularly left him at the classroom door" (C1_P2). Deborah explained Matthew's regression in Year Two:

> He loved his teacher. She was fantastic with him. He felt really safe and secure with her. Once we got through that initial "bye" he was fine. And he's that kid who's constantly worried about what was happening. I would have to say, "I'm going home to vacuum". As long as he thought I was here vacuuming the floor … it was all good with his world (C1_P2).

Melissa's case was a model of successful transitioning. She had no difficulty with starting her first school and her transition to her second school was also smooth. On the last day of the school year, she visited the new school and met the new teacher. There, the teacher's student-centred approach made all the difference:

> She spent the whole afternoon in there. He was fantastic. He's like, "I have got all her information, thank you. I have read all her reports, thank you. She will be fine in this model.…He said to her, "Melissa, the kids are expecting you. If you go into the class and they start to crowd you, would you like me to ask them to give you a bit of space or are you happy for them to come up?" [She said], "I want a bit of space." [He said], "I can do that for you". She went into the classroom. [He said], "I am going to go in and I am going to go about my business, teaching, because the most important thing to happen this afternoon isn't that I check her out; it's that she checks me out. So I am going to go about my business and let her watch me and become a bit more familiar with me, because that's actually the whole point of the afternoon" (C8_P).

This teacher was selected as a "really great match for Melissa". Monica noted his sensitivity, and when she discovered that he was "actually adopted as well" she "knew it was a perfect match" (C8_P). The principal also endeavoured to develop positive relationships with the children. She told Melissa:

> If you have any problems, you come to me. If you need to speak to me on the phone when you are not at school, if you have any questions before you start school, you call me and I will speak to you (C8_P).

It was reported that this principal would greet and spend time with children who arrived early to school and Melissa would often ask her mother, "Can we go early, because I want to spend time in the office? … When we get to school, can you just give me a kiss and go?" In this case, school policy and practices, including an emphasis on developing secure, empathetic relationships between staff and children, made a significant difference to this young girl's transition to a new school. This case illustrated that when adoptees feel safe and secure, like many other children, they are more likely to transition smoothly between schools and year levels.

Children adopted over three years of age

Several children adopted over the age of three had more difficulty transitioning between year levels, due to either their academic readiness and the rate of progression, or the lack of continuity of teachers and friendships.

Rate of progression through year levels (academic readiness)

Sita's initial transition to school went well. However, the rapid rate of transition between year levels to Year Five caused significant challenges due to her language and learning difficulties and the school's lack of appropriate support. Sita was in a Prep-3 class in 2012 and 2013 and progressed to a Years 4-7 class in 2014 with her same age peers and the principal as her teacher. She had three teachers during her first two years of school. A buddy system assisted Sita to move from the first class to the next. Academically, however, she was not equipped to complete the work done in this older class. Sita's parents were very frustrated at the rate at which she was required to progress through the year levels:

> She was there three years, she was still doing prep work and she was in year 5-6-7 … colouring in the corner. We kept saying can't you hold her back and they would say, "No, she's got to move with her peers" (C6_P2).

Both parents were concerned that Sita was approaching high school without the basic academic requirements, that she was "going from colouring to high school" and would not cope there (C6_P1). They wanted her to be kept back and expressed their frustration: "This is the way the system works, and we couldn't get them to be flexible outside of the system" (C6_P2). Hence, a change of school and school system resulted.

Continuity of teachers and friends

Cooper pointed out that commencing a new year at school was a challenge for ***Rick,*** due to new teachers not knowing about or understanding his level of anxiety regarding shouting (C5_P1). The issue of teachers shouting at Rick for various behaviours was an ongoing problem for the family which contributed to a breakdown in communication and parent-staff relationships and ultimately led to a change of schools.

There were "many days [when] ***Melanie*** did not want to go to school" and throughout Year One, Janet worked to foster a "large circle of friends", as advised by the teacher, which encouraged her daughter to attend (Doc_29). However, despite Janet's request to the contrary, Melanie was placed in a class with a teacher new to the school and no established peer friendships. Janet's concern was supported by letters from both a paediatrician (Doc_27) and a psychologist (Doc_28) to the principal. The paediatrician explained that significant changes in friends, teacher and year level "ha[ve] resulted in a deterioration [of] her general functioning in the home environment" and caused regression of her ongoing anxiety-related toileting problem. The psychologist also emphasised Melanie's need to be with some of her established friends:

> She, as with most traumatized children, struggles to understand boundaries of social interaction and the interpretation of social cues.… Melanie has been able to make a solid little friendship group. For Melanie, the very nature of her start in life and her adoption means that she has experienced a profound sense of being different, confused and isolated. It is therefore extremely important that she maintains a familiar peer group rather than once again having to learn new social relationships in the context of all the other changes that a new year at school brings (Doc_28).

Despite these medical recommendations and requests from the parents, a change in class was not granted (Doc_29) and this exacerbated Melanie's difficulties at school.

Academic experiences

Academic success

Most of the children adopted by age two experienced academic success at school. For example, ***Matthew*** and ***Andrea*** (C1) and ***Sarah*** and ***Richard*** (C2) all consistently achieve As and Bs. Matthew sets very high goals for himself with a tendency towards perfectionism in both academic achievement and behaviour (Figures 6.6 and 6.7; C1_P2; C1_Ch1). When transitioning from primary to secondary school, he was tested and selected from all Year Seven students in the district to be a part of the secondary school's extension program. According to Deborah, only "the cream of the crop is invited to be a part of this extension class" (C1_P2).

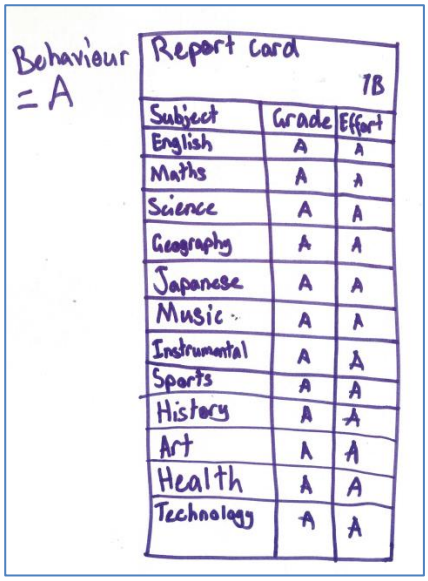


Figure 6.7. Own choice: Goal setting

Matthew sets high achievement goals for his next end-of-year report card.

Figure 6.6. Me, my friends and adoption

Matthew reveals perfectionist tendencies in his repeated attempts to draw himself correctly (labelled as "Me"). He appreciates his friends who are "very supportive and helpful"

(Matthew, age 12).

Several children received learning support in school or through private external tutoring services, mostly in English and Maths (C4; C5; C8), and in some cases this resulted in significant improvement (C5, C8). In ***Rick's*** case, the external tutor was

"nurturing him … and he's doing so well", although his parents maintained their frustrations regarding what they perceived as the school's inability to help him improve his results (C5_P2; C5_P1). Following a change of school (to a more independent and self-regulated approach to learning), ***Melissa's*** tutors "can't believe the difference. Where it used to take her two and a half hours to do the set work, she's doing it in an hour and a half [now]" (C8_P). This study affirmed that children adopted at a young age and those who have developed good language skills either do well or respond well to targeted intervention in various curriculum areas (generally English and Maths), in much the same way as their non-adopted peers.

Academic challenges

This study's findings reveal that challenges experienced by children adopted closer to school age, or with various conditions which are difficult for teachers to identify or support, can lead to untimely, ineffective or inadequate interventions. Without timely and accurate identification of language and other learning needs, and access to skilled educators and practitioners offering appropriate curriculum support, the academic concerns for these students can be exacerbated. In this study, eight children had moderate to significant learning difficulties as a result of either complex conditions or inadequate language acquisition that sometimes resulted in issues with self-esteem. In five cases, this was compounded by apparent school inefficiencies and insufficient academic (including language) support. In one case, where early intervention and external providers were accessed through the school, positive academic outcomes ensued. Examples are provided as follows.

Language, learning and children's self-esteem

Melanie's case highlighted a significant issue for intercountry adoptees. Her inability to communicate in English when she commenced school had a significant impact on her learning, friendships, confidence and self-esteem. Her developing skills in her native language were lost soon after arrival in Australia. "She actually lost all her language after five months … she had no words in [her birth language] left", which caused her to become very frustrated at home, unable to communicate, resulting in tantrums and banging her head on the tiled floor, vomiting and toileting accidents (C10_P).

During the transition period to her first school in Year One, 2012, Melanie was given a standard spelling test. She was "confused and uncertain" because of her

inability to complete the test and other children accused her of cheating. Janet immediately lost confidence in the teacher's ability to cater for her daughter. At her second school (2013-2014), she received speech and language therapy and was assessed by a Speech Pathology educator and student at the University of Queensland Speech Pathology Clinic. Diagnostic tests indicated "difficulties in speech sound production and expressive language skills" and "a low average range of rate, comprehension and accuracy of reading. Her reading age was between 6.2-7.3 years" (actual age 8.5) (Doc_31).

Despite the home support and the external therapy, school personnel did not know how to further assist Melanie with her language and learning. At the commencement of Year Two, 2014, Janet explained Melanie's needs, with the teacher "[taking] it all on board". However, at the end of Term Three, the teacher reported, "I'm really worried, Melanie is falling behind" (C10_P). In a letter to the district area supervisor of schools, Melanie's mother stated that Melanie is "very bright [but] does not achieve her optimal potential due to the lack of comprehension in English; subsequently, she experiences difficulties in the classroom**"** (Doc_29). Janet outlined a range of academic concerns including very limited understanding of everyday words and verbal and non-verbal cues. For example, other children would often ask Melanie questions to which she would answer, "Yeah", without understanding the questions. Children have responded with, "You're stupid". Melanie once said, "Mum, I can't do maths" to which Janet replied, "Melanie, you are very good at maths …. It's because you can't read the English that you can't do the maths. You can't understand what they're asking you" (C10_P).

The maths situation was repeated in other areas. It was reported that substitute and specialist teachers were not advised of Melanie's level of language ability (C10_P). Requests for music song sheets to be sent home to enable her mother to assist her in learning the English lyrics were not responded to. The ESL teacher (an Australian immigrant) "caused her embarrassment and confused her" by making references to her birth mother and her birth name (which was requested not to be used at school) due to the erroneous assumption that this was a case for "celebrating one's culture", but without consideration that Melanie's memories might not be positive. According to Melanie, the teacher commented that her own daughters could

pronounce words properly so, "Why can't you?" Melanie was scared and did not want to go to her class the next day (CS10_P).

Ascertaining learning needs; obtaining support

Joanne's daughters experienced different language and learning needs and received varying levels of support at school. In spite of her rapid acquisition of oral language, in Year Three ***Mary*** experienced difficulty learning to read and was not being supported at school. Joanne phoned the school:

> "Mary's in Grade Three, she cannot read. What is being done?" And so, there was a bit of action around that but not anything really serious. And then it wasn't until grade five that we got her diagnosed.

Joanne undertook training in the Orton-Gillingham approach to supporting children with reading difficulties, which assisted both parents to understand the implications of dyslexia. Mary was assessed and her parents were given a detailed Educational Diagnostic Dyslexia Profiling Assessment Report (Doc_7) which specified weaknesses in Mary's phonological awareness, and "below mastery" level in written language skills. The report included numerous specific suggestions which Joanne shared with the school:

> [Mary needs] ample practice in word attack skills, from isolated phonemes to words for reading and spelling; decoding regular and irregular [sight] words. For optimum benefits instruction needs to be multisensory, sequential and structured. (Doc_7).

The assessment also identified areas of strength that could be further enhanced at school:

> Mary is very superior to superior in most subtests on the test of nonverbal intelligence.… she should do well in subject areas that rely on non-verbal skills. She can reason without words and solve mental puzzles that involve progressive elements (Doc_7).

Further recommendations were made to assist the school in developing an individualised support plan. When asked how the school received this report, Joanne said:

> Really well, however, they didn't act on it.… They used to chuck her in learning support, or whatever … [but] they didn't put things in place to actually alleviate those issues, because they didn't know how.… Even

> though I actually physically translated it and said she does not know the use of phonemes ….Well, they don't have the time to do the intervention. It has to be an intervention … I actually physically translated it …no one actually said, "Ok, this week I'm doing this with her" (C3_P2).

Joanne said that her daughter was "stagnating" at school in spite of "reading with her every night". It wasn't until Year Six that the school made some "accommodations" and provided "help … in class to make it easy" for her (C3_P2). She argued that, "It has to go to the training of teachers, because that would be the biggest change ever. … If they just got that in place and educated the teachers" (C3_P2). The parents' selection of high school for Mary (the year after interview) was based on the expertise and experience of the Learning Support teacher in supporting Mary's condition. While it is unknown whether dyslexia was a direct outcome of Mary's pre-adoption experience, the issue of teacher training to effectively identify concerns, refer for early intervention and continue to support language development at school was notable in this study.

A contrasting outcome from the same family reveals what is possible with early intervention and appropriate support. Mary's sister ***Sienna*** had language and learning difficulties which were more obvious, and documentation from her birth country triggered a response for early support. An initial speech pathology assessment in Year Two identified that Sienna "is presenting with significant delays across all areas of the curriculum" and recommended further investigations into her "language, learning and literacy difficulties within the school setting" (Doc_3). Her Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals (CELF-4)[26] test identified performance on all subtests (concepts and following directions; recalling sentences, formulated sentences, word structure) as either severe or very severe in terms of functioning (Doc_4). In the clinician's opinion, students with these difficulties

> also present with difficulties following, and recalling classroom discourse (general conversation, directions and instructions) … poor attention, processing issues or working memory dysfunction.… Within the 'sensory loaded' classroom setting, Sienna would really struggle to process and retain any verbally presented information (Doc_3).

[26] The *CELF 4* test evaluates the student's ability and performance on a range of expressive and receptive language tasks.

Sienna has also reported to both her mother and the clinician that she "forgets names of her friends, teachers who work with her and things Mrs N says" (Doc_4). Sienna provided an example of the difficulty she has in comprehending and processing maths problems:

> Sometimes I don't really know what it means, like, some things that I read and don't really know what it is telling me to do. For maths, I got stuck with things like maths that tells you, "How many coins you get back from the shop keeper" and you don't really know what to do and you don't really know what it's telling you and you don't really know and you think it's a little bit hard for you to do it (C3_Ch).

A letter from her paediatrician to the school principal stated:

> Sienna has a history of quite significant learning difficulties. Assessments by myself and her speech therapist suggest quite significant core language difficulties (greater than expected due to her ESL), and, poor working memory. Sienna's reading level is far behind her chronological age. Inattention probably contributes to Sienna's difficulties at school although I do not feel it is a primary issue. I would appreciate if you could organise cognitive function testing for Sienna (Doc_4).

Early assessment and subsequent communication between a speech pathologist, parents, paediatrician and the school initiated a modified curriculum and assessment program for Sienna. A private speech therapist came into the school on a weekly, then fortnightly basis for a year, at the parents' expense. According to Joanne, the outcome has been "really, really, good. Her reading is just so much [better]". Such has been Sienna's improvement that early plans to verify her condition have ceased because "now she's not eligible to get verified because there's such an improvement" (C3_P2).

Teachers have also encouraged Sienna's growing confidence and self-esteem through the provision of achievement certificates which targeted language improvement. She received recognition on three certificates for:

- amazing her friends and teachers with her great work and how quickly she has learnt to speak English (Year One; Doc_8)
- becoming a superstar reader and always giving her very best efforts in Book Club groups (Year Two; Doc_9)

- a very detailed retell of your reading book and for making a big effort to read with expression! (Year Three; Doc_10)

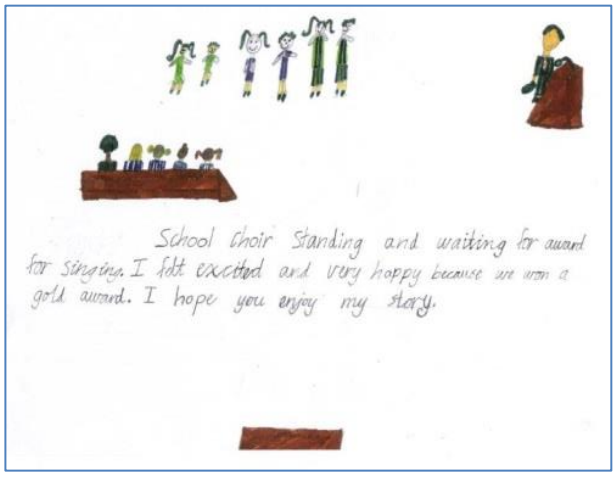


Figure 6.8. A happy moment at school

(Sienna, age 9)

Her teachers similarly encouraged her through her inclusion in the school choir which received a "Gold Award" on a school assembly for their efforts (see Figure 6.8). She explained that getting the Gold Award "make me excited" (C3_Ch) and Joanne confirmed: "She was so excited getting that gold award. It was an amazing day" (C3_P2). Her drawing ability has also been encouraged:

> In Grade 3 we were drawing Green Eggs and Ham, and I draw Cat in the Hat, and Mrs N saw that I was very good at art and so the boys and the girls came up to me and said, "Can you draw the Cat in the Hat, and Green Eggs and Ham for me please?" And I was like, freak out! (C3_Ch).

With hard work and determination, speech pathology sessions, a modified school program which included ESL classes, parent in-class support in her first year at school, medical intervention, and numerous opportunities for recognition and inclusion, Sienna has experienced significant success at school. Year One teachers commented on her progress on her annual Report Card:

> We have been impressed by the outstanding progress Sienna has made this year. It has been a pleasure to watch her learn and interact with her peers. Sienna displays a strong commitment to her school work and this has assisted her greatly when facing the challenges of learning a new language. … It has been an honour to be part of such a special and exciting time in Sienna's life (Doc_11).

A psychologist's report (Doc_20) from ***Sita's*** special school in her birth country stated, "Her reading and writing skills are absolutely unformed" and suggested that this could be caused by a "learning disorder or even autism." Difficulties were exacerbated by the school's insistence that Sita was made to use her

(non-natural) right hand in accordance with cultural practices (C6_P1; Doc_24). However, a second psychologist's report from the same school indicated "a lot of improvement" in Sita's language, daily living activities and social skill development during the time she attended the school (Doc_21).

Immediately upon Sita's initial enrolment in an Australian school, her parents requested that her needs be ascertained. "She needed assistance for her delays and her shortcomings in her education, but she also needed assistance because she was only just starting to learn the English language" (C6_P1). The school delayed assessment of capacities for two to three years because of her complex background and the number of cultural and language variables (C6_P1; C6_P2). However, they made some adjustments and sought some assistance, albeit with limited effect. Sita's first two years at school were spent undertaking the P-2 curriculum in English, Maths and Science with a focus on the Prep outcomes, with some tailored modifications. In 2013, she "progressed to the Year 4-7 room as an age appropriate setting but still join[ed] her younger peers for many activities" (Doc_24). Shortly after her enrolment, an Education Queensland ESL visiting supervisory teacher observed Sita and confirmed her need for language support. John summarised her comments:

> Yes, it's a pity she's right out here in a rural school because she is an ESL student but we certainly don't have the funding to have an ESL teacher out here. If she was in Brisbane where there were 20 kids like her she might get some assistance (C6_P1).

The school then tried unsuccessfully to obtain ESL support for Sita. The parents' contact with their local government member prompted a visit from an official who made some suggestions, but did not facilitate any further activity (C6_P2). Though Sita was eligible for ESL support, this did not eventuate. Instead, Sita was assigned a teacher aide for five hours per week to assist her in the classroom. While this was helpful, its impact was limited.

> She wasn't trained … it was just someone to be there for her. Sometimes it was just going for a walk, doing craft in the garden. It was nothing really academic (C6_P2).

However, Sita appreciated having the extra support. When asked, "What's your favourite thing to do at school?" she recalled reading books and receiving help from some ladies at school. Sita drew "[A] book store, looks like. This is a book shelf … and this is a table, looks like a bench table" (see Figure 6.9). She talked about going to the library at school to do some work with "Miss S" and "Miss P" and said she liked it when "Miss R" came to work with her (C6_Ch). Her comments reflect a desire to learn and her appreciation of help given, despite her difficulties.

Figure 6.9. Own choice: "My favourite thing to do at school – reading books."

Sita (age 10)

Sita talks about her drawing:

Q. What's your favourite thing to do at school?

Sita draws dots in a circle to represent lots of books on a shelf. "Reading. Book, book, book, lot o' book. Hundreds of many books. … I look at the pictures, I look at a word. Orange colour. This is my grandad favourite colour, orange" (C6_Ch).

According to her parents, Sita's needs became more evident to the principal when she moved up to his class, but "he didn't have the skills to accommodate that. … [She was] twiddling her thumbs" (C6_P1), "colouring in, in the corner" (C6_P2). The principal referred Sita to the Speech-Language Therapy Services in Education, whose initial assessment was followed by two intervention sessions, which targeted Sita's ability to "attend to a basic concept in a simple direction or sentence". A final assessment determined that Sita "needed a high level of support to complete tasks" (Doc_23). This assessment report indicated that the type of support which Sita needed

> was not consistent with typical bilingual language learning. The level of language achieved was below that expected for a child learning English as a second language at [Sita's] age and grade level (Doc_23).

Three further tests administered by the Guidance Officer in February and March, 2013,[27] reported:

> Sita's skills in some areas are less developed than a 4 to 5 year old child and in other tasks she has not been able to demonstrate the prerequisite skills to obtain a basal score. After two years in an enriched environment and immersion in the preschool curriculum, Sita has made some progress, but she is not able to demonstrate many of the skills and learning that her peers have made in the same time (Doc_24).

The report recommended that Sita be given an official verification and "an enhanced opportunity to develop her skills" through "intensive support and a highly modified curriculum to that of her age peers" (Doc_24). In 2013, following an official verification of Intellectual Impairment, Sita received some support from Advisory Visiting Teachers (AVTs) and the allocation of additional teacher aide hours. However, there was no trained teacher to implement a language development program (C6_P1). Instead, four different AVTs visited over a seven month period for a recommended one hour per week, which was delivered inconsistently due to changes in personnel. "There was no consistency" (C6_P2); "She'd just get used to one person …. I think the first AVT would basically make cakes with her" (C6_P2), although the third AVT "was really good". The fourth AVT provided advice about transferring Sita to a special school (C6_P1).

Lana and John were frustrated by a perceived lack of appropriate support from the Education Department. When language support was unavailable in the Prep-2 class, the parents liaised with the classroom teacher and a family friend (a registered teacher) with extensive experience working internationally with children from varying cultures. The friend volunteered to work with Sita in the school to identify and address gaps in her learning. The class teacher was keen to facilitate this, but the principal was not, which further exasperated the parents. "Once they knocked back our offer of a volunteer tutor, we realised that they weren't there for her" (C6_P1). "She's just there to fill the numbers" (C6_P2). "She can't even write her own name after three years" (C6_P1).

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[27] i) Wechsler Nonverbal Scale of Ability (WNV) to measure general cognitive ability; ii) Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test – Fourth Edition (PPVT-4) to measure receptive vocabulary, and iii) Expressive Vocabulary Test, 2nd Edition (EVT-2).

Both Lana and John agreed that if Sita had received appropriate language support from the beginning of her time at the school, "gaps in her learning" may have been identified and additional assistance made possible (C6_P2). Lana attributed much of her difficulty to poor language development:

> It's just all white noise to her. She couldn't speak English for quite a while. So you imagine – she's sitting there for six hours a day, and she knows 20 English words, and all of a sudden she's like, "Noise, noise, noise, noise", I know that word, "Noise, noise, noise", I know that word. So you imagine what it was like for her. They just said, "And" – I know that word. They just said, "Mummy" – I know that word, and the rest is just "Noise, noise, noise, noise" (C6_P2).

The inequitable access to resources occasioned by a remote location is of serious concern. However, since Sita commenced at the special school, her parents noted strong progress:

> Within a month her vocabulary had extended. She started asking us, "How was your day today, Dad? How was your yoga tonight, Mum? Who was at your class?" She started engaging in conversation. It's just remarkable the difference. Imagine what could have been possible for Sita if she had gone to this school from the start (C6_P2).

Melanie, Mary, Sienna and Sita were all adopted close to school age (between 4½ and 7 years of age). Each of these girls needed additional language support and Sienna and Sita had additional learning difficulties. In Melanie's case, school curriculum requirements (compulsory LOTE, ESL access) and communication protocols were obstacles to her success at school. Early testing in English (in the first month at school) confused her and impacted on her confidence and self-esteem. Sita's significant support needs were not able to be catered for in a small rural school. Her rapid progression through the primary school system, as a result of the disparity between her chronological and emotional ages and her age at adoption, left her floundering and unable to cope in a mainstream education system. Mary had a condition (dyslexia) which, apparently, was not understood by teachers despite external and parental support and advice. This caused her to struggle in school for a prolonged period. Sienna was assessed, diagnosed and modifications and support were put in place in the early years of schooling. A team approach between school,

parents and external professionals continues to make her experience of school a positive and successful one. The experiences of these four children highlighted a number of important variables which can make the difference between a positive and negative experience for older adoptees at school.

Social and emotional experiences

Most of the children in this study conversed easily and had little or no trouble making friends at school. A small number had difficulty communicating, but with encouragement and minimal support from their parents, all participated well. Their social and emotional experiences at school, however, were influenced by many factors. The importance of developing friendships with children of other races as well as other adoptees was highlighted and it was suggested that both parents and schools have a role to play with this. Lack of language or understanding of social cues and norms can impede the important work of making friends and of "fitting in" at school. Differences in chronological and social/emotional age for children from traumatised backgrounds were a further impediment to making same-age friends. The comments and questions asked of adoptees by other children, in particular, was a relatively minor issue for these children and overall they had developed their own approach to responding to these.

The importance of friendships

Developing secure, trusting and supportive friendships with other children at school is important developmental work for all children. Some of the children in this study, like ***Andrea*** (C1), ***Richard*** and ***Sarah*** (C2), are very social and outgoing and have no difficulty making friends. For example, while Richard has a special group of friends, he "will play with anyone and everyone". He is "very confident … [has] lots of friends … knows everybody" and is "very popular" in class (C2_P). What ***Amaris*** likes best about school is the friendships she has developed: "They are always very nice to me and they are very understanding" (Figure 6.10).

Figure 6.10. I like school because …

(Amaris, age 10)

Minor altercations with some classmates occur because she finds them "rude and bossy" and they "tell us what to do" (C9_Ch); however, adoption or racial issues do not appear to have an impact. Diane explained that Amaris has "never had trouble making friends" (C9_P) and she considers recent "clashes" this year to be typical for her stage of development. This was certainly the experience of these children who were assimilated into their adoptive families at a young age.

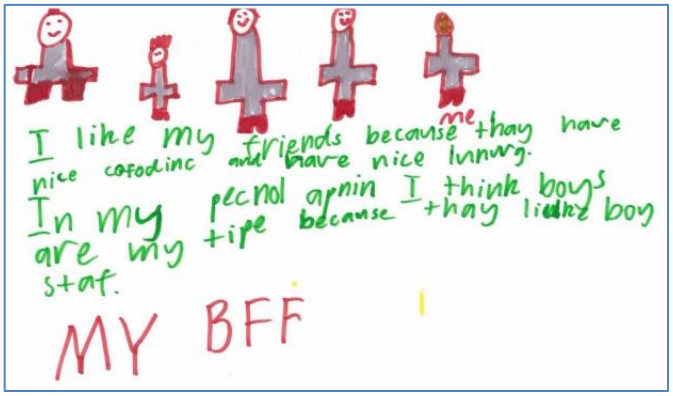
Inter-racial friendships at school

Sarah and ***Richard*** had numerous positive social relationships at school with children from a variety of racial backgrounds and maintained the same friendships since their Prep year at school. Sarah's three close friends were very important to her and come from Australian, Filipino and Greek backgrounds. Sarah told the story, "It all started on the first day" when the girls from non-Australian backgrounds became firm friends: "Imani came rushing up to me and started talking to me and then Ella came in and I ran up to her. And then we all formed a little group" (C2_Ch1). Sarah enjoyed having children from other cultures at her school, "and especially the people from [her birth country]" (C2_Ch1).

Richard's close friendship group has four boys from Australian, Iraqi, Greek and Thai backgrounds. "Craig came from New Zealand, Michael came from Australia and I don't know where Damian came from. He's white skinned" (C2_Ch2). Clearly, Richard places less importance on his friends' countries of origin, but does notice colour difference. On his drawing, he wrote: "I like my friends because they have nice confidence and nice language". The friends share information about their families and personal histories with one another:

> Craig tells me some stuff about his parents. He tells me sometimes when he came to Australia and how old he was … he was two when he came here. Michael and Louis … they're twins …they also bring photos of when they're at their house … he brought a photo in of his house covered in snow. That's why we are all friends, because we share our stuff that we know (C2_Ch2).

Describing the uniform and colours he used in his "Friends, other kids and adoption" drawing (Figure 6.11), Richard said: "Because we all are best friends, I was thinking we could all have the exact same clothes on, because most friends like to have the exact same stuff" (C2_Ch2). While the adoption experience is not a



common denominator, nor is country of origin, it is evident that these friends "normalise" their relationship by valuing their differences and through the homogeny provided by the school context.

Figure 6.11. Friends, other kids and adoption

These four children, adopted at a young age, attend schools with a significant multi-cultural population. Hence, their friendship groups consist of children from different cultural backgrounds. Each of them spoke comfortably about the differences they have noticed at school. For example, Andrea commented that one boy's mother is "Indian or something like that". Another friend is "South African. She speaks Afrikaans". Another friend was born in Italy and "sort of speaks Italian". Still another boy "speaks South African … was born in South Africa, but his mum is German" (C9_Ch). Cultural diversity for intercountry adoptees in culturally diverse schools seems to be significant to these children's ability to normalise cultural difference and their place in the school.

Friendships with other adoptees

The importance of friendships outside of school, within their adoption support groups, was significant to a number of the children. Parents also stressed the importance of friendships with other adoptees. For example, ***Matthew*** and ***Andrea's*** "favourite besties in the entire world", their "go to people", are friends from within their own country adoption support group (C1_P2). Deborah commented:

> You know, I think that's probably been a huge part of their success. Is having that strong connection to other adopted children. It's that shared journey and that shared conversation … the conversations that happen amongst them, the incidental conversations – "Hey, I've got a sister in [birth country]" … "Hey, me too, I've got two." It helps to normalise the process for them, and it gives them someone to talk to (C1_P2).

Sarah explained what she had in common with her friends from her country support group:

> … there's lots of different [things]. For example, we came from the same country … we share the same relationship, like what happens in our family. We've lived the same life, with people not the same, like you. And there's only one of you, then everybody else (C2_Ch1).

Karen described Marlena's reaction when she first went to an IA camp:

> "Mummy, there's other kids like me with parents with the different colour"; and she just loved it, you know.… She doesn't get that at school or anything like that (C4_P2).

While there were a number of adoptive families in ***Amaris's*** school, she did not know them, so they did not form a part of her friendship group. In this case, cultural diversity was the norm, the adoption experience was less significant at school, and the value of friendship appeared to take priority. When asked what she liked best about her close friend, Amaris said, "She's very funny and she has a sense of humour" (C9_Ch).

Janet envisaged that the benefits of enrolling ***Melanie*** in her second school in Australia would include making friends with several other adoptees who attended this school, as "making friends was challenging" for Melanie with each change of school (C10_P). It became apparent that age at adoption and parental values had an impact on such friendships developing. Adoptive parenting of younger and older adopted children was incongruous on many levels. For example, Melanie formed a friendship with one girl who was adopted at a young age, but the friend's mother began to withdraw contact between the girls. Janet concluded that this was due to her family's openness about Melanie's pre-adoption experiences, their emphasis on the importance of homeland visits, and maintaining diet and language (from her birth country) (C10_P). Unlike some families in this study, these priorities may not always be valued or desired by families who adopt their children as infants. It became evident that the adoption experience as a common denominator does not always ensure friendships develop between children at school. However, friendships with children from their own or other cultures appear to be important to their social well-being and sense of belonging. Normalising cultural difference within and outside of school appears to have had significant social benefits for most of these children.

Language, social cues and "fitting in"

Some children have difficulty making friends due to language difficulties and/or a failure to understand social cues. For example, ***Sienna's*** mother attributed some of her difficulties to the "abrupt, assertive" way that she speaks to friends, as well as the lack of fluency, clarity and structure to her speech, which meant "she could be picked on for that" (C3_P2). However, this is "improving all the time", and overall Sienna has been "really lucky; she's had really good friends … she's not playing by herself at school" (C3_P2).

Marlena's father described her as someone who is "really nervous" around friends and will sometimes "struggle with having more than one friend at a time" (C4_P1). Her social skills have improved, however, since being in Australia, and her parents acknowledge the significant role of the teacher in this:

> Starting Grade One, she had no awareness of people's personal space and that was always an issue whenever she went somewhere and – I mean, her teacher has helped a lot and we've seen big improvements (C4_P2). She used to get right up in people's faces (C4_P1) … it was always part of bonding and just – she's a very touchy, feely person and she needs – she needs that (C4_P2). But it's more of an awareness of people that she doesn't know, that she's right there on their laps and in their faces and things like that … she's grown and she's more aware now (C4_P2).

Marlena's lack of confidence and self-esteem was evident throughout our conversation and in her drawings. Very close in age, Marlena has a number of learning difficulties and is in a grade below her brother Brendon (C4_P1; C4_P2). This may account for their fierce competitiveness – his friends are her friends, his likes, dislikes and ambitions are hers also, and this frustrates him (C4_P2). Her mother confirmed this:

> She feels very competitive with Brendon. She doesn't feel as good as him and things like that.… [things he] is good at she wants to be good at too … his best friend has to be Marlena's best friend, too.… He can't have anything of his own (C4_P2).

Figure 6.12. Own choice: My friend at school

(Marlena, age 8)

The children talk while drawing:

Marlena: This is going to be Sandy.

Brendon: Why Sandy? She's in my class.… Marlena, Sandy is my friend.

Marlena: No.

Brendon: Yes. She's not even in your class, Marlena. She's in my class. And besides grade ones aren't allowed with grade two.

Marlena: You're just saying that.

Brendon: Sandy, she likes, well, I wouldn't say likes, she really loves me.

Marlena: This is me and this is Sandy holding hands, and I said "I love …".

Brendon: (significant arguing) Marlena, you are not playing with Sandy!

Marlena: OK, well this is Sandy. This is me, holding hands. And I said, "I love Sandy" and this says, "My Sandy, I love Sandy because she is so pretty.… She's beautiful and she's really kind to me.… She has black hair like me and she lets everyone play, even me. She's really kind to people, especially Brendon and me (C4_Ch1; C4_Ch2).

Marlena has made attempts to make friends in her own class; however, she said, "They are kind of mean.… Sometimes they're not my friends. They don't really mind about me" (C4_Ch2). Brendon recalled how "I sticked up for my sister. She pulled her shirt and choking her" (C4_Ch1). Most of Marlena's drawings and conversation focused on one girl, an older girl named Sandy who is Brendon's good friend and classmate (see Figure 6.12). Allowed to flow for a time, the conversation was fierce as both children asserted their rights to Sandy's friendship. Even though Marlena rarely spends time with Sandy, it is clear she looks up to this girl and appreciates how she accepts her and makes her feel included at school. She also depends on her brother's interests and values to ensure her own inclusion.

Social and emotional age

After John's transition presentation to the first school, the children were excited to see ***Sita***, both in and outside of school, including various community locations and events. However, other children soon found it difficult to relate to her "because of her impairments … they don't really know how to connect with her and that's just what happens with kids with disabilities" (C6_P1). The language barrier also caused frustration for other children: "They have no comprehension of what it's like to learn a language. They just think you hear it and know it" (C6_P1). Sita is more social with younger children due to her social and emotional level of development and capabilities: "She'd be more happy to socialise with a three year old than she would be with someone her age" (C6_P1). A child with learning disabilities and language barriers, Sita's pre-adoption experiences may have also contributed to this developmental delay. Lana described her capacity when they first brought Sita home:

> She had no social skills at all. She had no idea how to be a child because she spent her first years on the street in (her birth country), the next three years in the children's home, so all she observed was the social skills and the behaviour of children in children's homes, so she had no idea how to be a child (C6_P2).

However, since enrolling in the special school, Sita looks forward to participating in "Girls' Club", where children closer to her own age paint their nails and generally have fun. In her previous school she would often sit alone to have lunch or play with the younger children in the sandpit, while observing older children. Generally, Sita

prefers to be with children who are quiet, gentle and non-threatening; however, at the new school, she is "a lot more confident", leads games and is sometimes even "assertive". She finds children who misbehave "amusing" (C6_P2). Sita is much more emotionally settled now than when she first came home:

> It used to be like we've got three or four children in one child. Sometimes, like recently, she wakes up and she's a teenager. And again, it's because she hasn't had that social interaction (C6_P2).

Sita's drawing (Figure 6.13) and conversation indicate that she is happy and has made several friends in her new school. This case demonstrates the value of friendships developed through appropriate socialisation for children with special language and learning needs.

Sita talks about her drawing and her friends:

Sun first. You always have to do the sun before start. Put a smiley face on it - happy face.

Q. How does that make you feel?

Happy. I like being happy … and some sky. I need a blue sky. Yeah, it's nice to be outside.

I can do Ashley, yeah. Ashley should be this face and one nose and one eye, she's got a blue eye. He's brown but he's little … my friend, Derek. He's skinny. Skinny and fat. … He's short, littler. ... Pinky colour, yeah. She's a pinky colour. She love pink.

Overhearing our conversation, Sita's mother clarified: Sita does not understand the concept of gender and all friends in the drawing are actually boys. In this drawing her focus is on identifying skin and hair colour, size and shape. She is very precise if not always accurate.

Figure 6.13. Friends at the "Tiger school"

(Sita, age 10)

Comments and questions

The literature suggests that intercountry adoptees, especially those in transracial families, are often asked questions about their adoption experience and the children manage these in different ways (Meese, 2002; Pertman, 2000; PASS, 2013; Schoettle, 2003). This study showed that not only do other children ask personal questions of adoptees, but teachers do also. ***Germaine*** recalled:

> Last year, they were always curious, even teachers. Mrs F, she was a teacher when I came in to school on the first day. She's very talkative. She asks me like, "How do you feel being adopted? How is it being in a different family, not your family?" (C7_Ch1).

Germaine explained that teachers have also asked, "What stuff do you do in [birth country]? How's your family going [in birth country]?" While he doesn't necessarily mind these questions, he does sometimes "try to veer out of that question and talk about something else". Unfortunately, "I try sometimes, but sometimes they keep going" (C7_Ch1). He rationalised his response to these types of questions:

> It's different. More family type questions I tend to try not to answer, because it's my personal family. Other questions I don't really mind. It's just the family questions, I ask them to not talk like that (C7_Ch1).

While he justified his response to other children, he said: "It's harder to say it to a teacher. It depends. If it's really personal, I might say, 'I don't really want to go there'" (C7_Ch1).

Diane explained that her family's recent participation in a program for adoptive families helped her work through a challenging situation that occurred with ***Amaris*** at school. She commented: "WISE Up has been really good for her [daughter]". Diane described the recent incident:

> She'd always had braids in her hair and then I took them out and so her hair was as it is naturally. A couple of the boys were giving her a hard time about that, saying, "Why is your hair so messy? Why is your hair like that?" - all that sort of stuff. So we just did some roleplays like they said in WISE Up, and both of us ended up laughing and lying on the floor (C9_P).

Diane explained, "She was fine with it after that and it's never been an issue ever since" (C9_P). Additional assistance from parents and through adoption support group initiatives appears to make a difference to how some children navigate

comments and questions at school. ***Amaris*** recalled only comments and questions about her adoption experience from her two closest friends, both from different cultural backgrounds, and she seemed to have managed these well. One friend asked, "Do you know when your real birthday is?" Amaris responded, "I don't know". The second friend commented, "It's sad that your mum didn't like you", and Amaris explained, "It's not that she didn't like me, it's just that she couldn't look after me" (C9_Ch). Such interaction is consistent with Allport's (1954) intergroup contact hypothesis for prejudice reduction, which supports the notion that when equal status exists between groups, when there is cooperation and opportunity for interpersonal interaction, and when groups are supported by those in authority, positive interracial actions and attitudes will follow (Banks & Banks, 2010; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005). Therefore, communication between friends from different cultural backgrounds on sensitive issues may potentially be less intimidating than might otherwise be assumed.

The children's maturity and experience with responding to comments and questions from others make a difference. For example, according to her mother, ***Sarah*** was asked, "Where's your real mother?" and her response elicited, "Oh, I feel sorry for you" (C2_P). Grace suggested that these instances are rare and that perhaps she is more concerned by this type of comment than her children are (C2_P). Sarah's explanation suggested this might be the case. When children ask her questions such as, "Do you know your mother's name?" or "Have you ever seen her before?" she answers them openly. She said: "Everybody else has other relationships, so, I feel that if I tell them they'll understand" (C2_Ch1).While Sarah is the only adoptee in her class, her growing awareness and maturity have given her greater insight into the complex nature of families in general.

Deborah and Craig suggested that the relaxed, open and matter-of-fact communication they have fostered with their children at home about their adoption influences how ***Matthew*** and ***Andrea*** respond to issues at school.

> I think that these guys are so relaxed with it, so that if the subject comes up "Why do you look so much different from your mum? How is that possible?" they'd just go "I'm adopted". It's just a fact and they move on (C1_P2).

Deborah gave an example of her daughter's response to an inquisitive classmate who asked her, "Is that your mum? How can that be your mum? You don't look the same." In her confident way, Andrea replied, "Because my mother's signed all the paperwork" (C1_P2). Andrea clarified that this child actually said, "That's my fake mum, but I say, she signed the papers and then she's my mum" (C1_Ch2). Similarly, Karen explained that when ***Marlena*** was asked why her mother was white and she was brown, she replied, "Oh, der, I'm adopted" and then skipped off (C4_P2).

These six children were adopted at a younger age, had several years in which to talk about and experience family difference with the support of their parents prior to starting school, and attend multicultural schools. These conditions appear to have made a difference to their social and emotional experiences at school. For older adoptees, friendships are equally important, and children may need additional support in some social situations. For example, ***Sienna*** said that when other children commonly ask her "Are you adopted?" or "Where did you come from?" sometimes she does not like to tell them "because it's kind of my secret. My secret, where I come from" (C3_Ch). So, while adoptees generally handled such questions with poise, there is still an element of privacy that needs to be respected.

Concerns about race and culture

Brendon does not cope well with change or in new situations. His mother stated, "I believe that because of the trauma that he went through in the loss … that has set him up socially, he really struggles" (C4_P2). He received regular counselling for anger management and this "has been very good" (C4_P1). According to his father, his "anger will just flare up … any time he feels insecure, or he feels like he's being left out or that he's abandoned. Like, it's massive.… Massive reactions and like, way over the top" (C4_P1). He "struggled really the first seven months of school" (C4_P2) and experienced racial taunts from other children such as, "You're ugly because you're brown" (C4_P2). His parents identified a usual pattern of behaviour both in and out of school in social settings. Karen recalled and interpreted her son's comments to her about his difficulty making friends at school:

> "I hate this school; I hate the people in it; I don't want friends; they're all mean; they're all terrible.… Nobody likes me, I don't have any friends.… It's because I'm brown … it's because I'm [race]; it's because I'm different to them", and in fact really what he was saying is, "I'm scared, I don't know

> how to make friends with these kids and I'm just going to push them away and it's my choice, I'm in control here", because he just didn't want to get hurt (C4_P2).

During the second term of school, however, Brendon made significant improvement socially. "He was almost like a different child once he made friends and then he felt comfortable (C4_P2) ... His teacher was so proud of him" (C4_P1).

This parent interview, conducted on an annual adoption camp, uncovered a very similar concern for Brendon on the first two days of camp. He said to Karen, "I hate this camp, I hate them" and was "almost mean to everybody just because he was trying to protect himself" (C4_P2). A short time after, however, he made new friends and "now he's everybody's best friend and he feels confident" (C4_P2).

The social and emotional experiences of the study group of children were consistent with the literature. A dominant element is the need for the development of positive friendships both within and beyond school and a deep need to "fit in". Even language and other learning difficulties can be softened when such friendships develop. Connectedness with others of similar race and culture is generally beneficial in this regard and tends to equip adoptees to handle questions about race, culture and personal differences quite successfully. However, while common, such ease is not universal and some issues of race and culture go more deeply than merely making friends, and so warrant further discussion.

Racial and cultural experiences

This study showed that, in a number of Australian schools, ethnic and cultural inclusion is limited to a "Contributions" or "Ethnic Additive" approach (Banks, 2006, pp. 59-60) to curricular or extra-curricular activities. However, the degree of cultural diversity in individual schools appears to make a difference to intercountry adoptees' sense of belonging, as well as to their experience of race (including racism) and assumptions, generalisations and stereotypes which may also be deeply felt by other groups of children at school.

Heroes and holidays

The celebration of discrete cultural celebrations in these children's schools varied in nature and number. They were more often than not tokenistic gestures as opposed to the higher-level transformative approaches identified by Banks (2006)

which are more likely to "help students to develop the identifications and behaviours needed to function effectively in multicultural democratic societies" (Banks, 2006, p. 59). In her children's school, which ***Grace*** considers to be highly multicultural, she stated that cultural celebrations have been "chopped right down" due to the added pressure of implementing the Australian curriculum. Very little is done apart from an "afternoon parade" for "Harmony Day" where "half a dozen kids from different cultures will come and sing a song or dress up" (C2_P). Grace did not see this as a deficit, however, but considered the school's treatment of children from diverse backgrounds to be equitable while giving greater priority to learning needs than cultural inclusion:

> Every kid is just treated as one – I mean, they more look at learning needs, rather than cultural needs. So if you happen to be Indian and you are struggling, you will get the same help as an Australian person that is struggling (C2_P).

In ***Sienna's*** school "they have Chinese New year at the beginning of the year" (C3_P2) and "a few different foods" at the school fete. However, "There's not one book in the library from [her children's birth countries]" (C3_P2). In ***Amaris's*** school, cultural experiences are often included through extra-curricular activities, such as an African drumming day and Harmony Day celebrations: "They are always doing multi-cultural things" (C9_P). While essentially an "Ethnic Additive" or "Heroes and Holidays" approach, (Banks, 2006, p.61), nevertheless, the children enjoyed the inclusion of these events. For example, Amaris particularly enjoyed the African drumming day (C9_Ch) and ***Matthew*** enjoyed trying out foods from different countries on Harmony Day, as well as teaching other children a traditional game from his birth culture. Referring to a noodle dish he took in to share at school, Matthew stated, "The teachers even had a bowl full" (C1_Ch1). Intercountry adoptees who have grown up in predominantly white Australian families may find many of these activities interesting and enjoyable, without the need for more significant immersion or identification with their birth culture at school.

Cultural diversity

While cultural immersion in their own birth culture may not be a priority for adoptees at school, the cultural diversity within ***Sarah*** and ***Richard's*** school has assisted the children to develop a strong sense of belonging. The school website

explains, “The diversity of the [local] community brings richness and broad cultural experiences to the school”, with over 20 different languages other than English spoken by more than 70 students in the school. Eight percent of families come from over 18 different countries, and a small number of children have refugee status. Three per cent identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (school website, accessed 8 January, 2015). Grace spoke of the importance of this “good [cultural] mix” to her children:

> They have never had that feeling of “I'm the only one”. They have always had other kids in their class, lots of different colourings, lots of different diversity. I think they’ve never had that feeling, “Oh, it is just me against everyone else”. So I think, yeah, it has made a big difference for them (CS2_P).

This was a similar experience for ***Matthew***, ***Andrea*** and ***Sienna,*** whose parents argued this was an advantage for their children (C1_P1; C1_P2; C3_P1; C3_P2). The children also seemed to appreciate the cultural diversity in their respective schools. For example, when asked what she thought when she saw children from other countries at school, Sienna, replied, “I think that they look beautiful when they came from different countries” (C3_Ch).

For some, connecting with others from the same cultural and racial origin provides personal support:

> The girls have really enjoyed hanging out with the other black girls, because they’ve learnt black girl things. Now you and I don’t know what that means. For a black girl that means your weave is itching and you can’t itch it; because you’ve paid $300 for that weave (C7_P).

Reflecting, however, on her children’s first school experience in a highly culturally diverse school with “about 300 kids and we had something like 200 different cultures”, Leonie said, “The refugee population was too big and there was too many social issues at the school … too many behavioural issues” (C7_P).

In ***Sita’s*** case, it appeared that explicit memories of traumatic early life experiences may have fostered a desire to disconnect from her birth country. John explained that Sita went through a period where “she didn’t like the mother country much” and Lana added, “I think because it caused triggers for her” (C6_P1; C6_P2). In this case, her parents did not consider their school’s lack of cultural diversity an

issue, as Sita was exposed to many different cultures through family friendships and did not look for the reassurance of connections to her birth country.

In ***Rick's*** school, there are a small number of children from Africa, India and China but these are "definitely the minority" (C3_P2). In this case, issues of race and social status seemed to take priority with young children over forming homogeneous friendships. Friction existed between several young boys from the same birth country where a perception of differences in social status prevailed. Renee and Cooper provided some insight:

> … when we found out that this little boy was starting, the headmistress called me and she said, "Do you think we should put them together?", and I said, "Absolutely" … and it was the worst thing that ever happened (C3_P2). They are totally different. They hated each other (C3_P1). … The headmistress used to get them in and say, "Okay, boys, what's your problem?", and they would both go simultaneously, "He's jealous" (C3_P2). Because one was a refugee and one was a free, in the school. … I guess if he was adopted, the other kid was adopted, I think they would have got on. Even the other kids … [there are] bigger kids from [birth country] in the class, but he doesn't go with them (C3_P1).

Again, it should be noted that commonality of race is not a guarantee of cultural harmony or "fitting in", as social distinctions within a race can also be abrasive or divisive. Rick, for example, had difficulty relating to an Indian child due to cultural and personality differences; however, he was prepared to be supportive despite these differences.

Figure 6.14. Things I don't like about school …
Inter-racial relationships
(Rick, age 10)

Rick drew Henry (Figure 6.14) and said:

> Henry is really annoying and no one likes him because he's really annoying. He makes up all these weird comments about his culture, like he's not allowed to walk in a straight line with other people and he's not allowed to play with other people. Sometimes, if people are being mean to him, I would say, "Stop it!" even if I didn't like him. So it's basically – I don't like him – but if something happened, if someone was being mean to him I'd say something (C5_Ch).

Racism

Monica argued that beyond ignorance, racism is "alive and well" in some Australian schools, and the lens through which teachers view issues of race and culture may affect the decisions some make. She provided an example from ***Melissa's*** first school, which she described as "Kingswood Country: the grossest Australian racism" she had encountered:

> We were in the car and she [Melissa] said to me, "Mum, I really wish my new school started tomorrow. … The only thing that I am a bit disappointed about is that I am going to miss out on the theatre restaurant that we were going to do in the last week of term 4. And I am a bit disappointed about that, but we weren't really supposed to talk to the parents about it." I said, "Oh, okay, all right." She said, "I was going to be with Rinado, who is the Sri Lankan boy", who she was often paired with in class. "We were going to do something in this play and I was going to be the Chinese girl; and my name was going to be Dim Sim" (C8_P).

Prior to Year One, Monica said that her daughter was "fine and happy and getting along", but with this teacher "all of a sudden [she] started getting in trouble all the time". Citing other examples, she stated that this teacher had "blind spots" manifested in racism which was at the "core of the conflict" leading to Melissa's change of school. While developmentally, according to her mother, Melissa did not understand the implications of the role and name she was given in her school play, Monica was concerned about the family being caught unaware at the performance, without any prior communication: "Imagine if we were there and it had happened in front of us" (C8_P). She was also concerned that when Melissa reaches adolescence, recalling this experience would equate to "an injury".

> It is not right. And it would never feel right when you had that awareness of racism. Thank God we saved her from that. … It would never happen where she is now; completely, completely wrong (C8_P).

Leonie's experience of having children at both state and private schools highlighted views about socio-economic status, cultural diversity and bullying, in terms of which system catered best for children from non-white or less privileged backgrounds. She praised the efforts of teachers in two state schools where her older daughter had attended. She explained that when "minor infringements" of racism occurred both schools "handled it very well" (C7_P). However, she was very discouraged by discriminatory class attitudes which included "bullying amongst parents" at one private girls' school.

> Oh, there was bullying everywhere … what damaged her was just the unbelievable cruelty from the top down – Just, you know, chapel had finished and that's when the Christian behaviour finished (C7_P).

When Leonie contacted the deputy principal stating that she was removing her daughter from the school because she did not like the school "culture", she stated that her daughter was verbally "abused" by the deputy with mocking comments about leaving, and the school administrators made no attempt to understand the family's concerns. Leonie argued that this was a general trend where the "black girls" were concerned: "[She's] just a good natured, easy-going kid. You would have been desperate not to lose her.... They've lost five black girls in the past three years and have not asked a single question about it" (C7_P). Leonie was also concerned that the staff could not distinguish between children from the same racial background, for example, her daughter's friend was constantly called by her daughter's name (C7_P). Clearly, the behaviour of this school's administrators and staff, and the visible class/race values within the wider school community, have influenced parent perceptions of state versus private education systems. At the time of interview, Leonie's eldest son was being bullied by another child at his current state school:

> The difference with [this school] is I rang his mum on Thursday and I could have a reasonable conversation. There's a nice sense of community and there's a nice sense of we just need to all get along (C7_P).

Germaine's recollection of this recent event inspired his drawing titled, "An unhappy or sad/worrying moment: Bullying at the park" (Figure 6.15). Germaine explained that he had been bullied by "the football team" for several months. As an avid soccer player, he attributed this to his recent efforts to play rugby and "It's also 'cause I'm like brown. It's just harder for me to try to fit in. They take advantage of that. They tease me" (C7_Ch1). He explained that the bullying mainly occurred during lunch breaks "in play time", but this recent altercation had happened in the park on the way home from school. He reported the physical and verbal abuse to his mother who phoned one boy's mother "and the main boy got in trouble" (C7_Ch1).

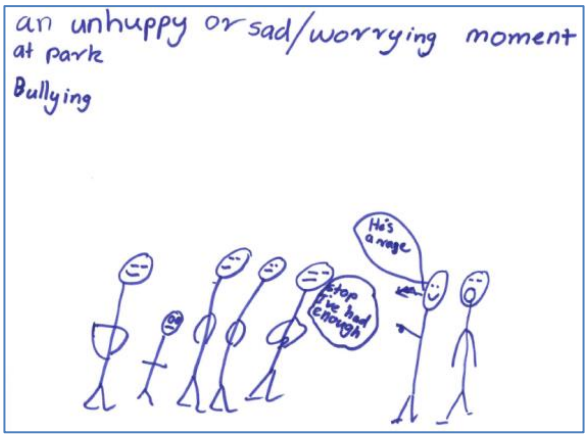


Figure 6.15. An unhappy or sad/worrying moment: Bullying at the park

(Germaine, age 12)

Assumptions, generalisations and stereotypes

Deborah was "really proud" that staff at her school had a good understanding of student diversity in both cultural and learning needs. Generalisations, assumptions and stereotypes were not evident.

> Because we are so multicultural, you know, the whole, the Asian kids are the smart kids. Well half our school is Asian. Not a fact.… We have too many. We know the difference.… I don't think there would be a single person on staff who would have that presumption, because we know. And we also appreciate that some of our children, our Vietnamese children, for instance, can come in with really great, apparent literacy skills, but it's all literal.… We have an SEP attached, a lot of inclusion, so we have all sorts of kids in our school (C1_P2).

While overall, Diane had positive communication with teaching staff, socially constructed views of race and culture by both teachers and the family have led to a cautious awareness on her part. At their first school, Diane attempted to discuss her concerns with a Grade One teacher about some verbal and written language errors ***Amaris*** was making. She wanted to determine if extra support was needed. Diane recalled the teacher's response: "Oh, no, I came over from Europe and I was older

and I'm fine." On this isolated occasion, Diane said, "That was very much a fob off" (C9_P). Her experiences in Amaris's birth country as a "white" parent of a "coloured" child has also fuelled Diane's caution about possible negative race/class perceptions by Caucasian immigrant families at the school. She is conscious of this when interacting with certain parents and children in her daughter's friendship group:

> She has a couple of friends who are white [natives to her birth country] – I have to be careful sometimes because our experience over there … [in] one of the big shopping centres … they would just look at you as if, "What are you doing with that child?" I'm kind of aware of that, but I think it's their loss kind of thing. I just want to make Amaris confident about who she is and that the issues are their issues not hers (C9_P).

Amaris, however, commented only on positive cultural interactions at school. For example, she discovered that her soccer teacher was born in the same proximal location. The teacher said, "Oh, we must be sisters" and taught her some words from their common birth language. Amaris said she felt good about this and she and her friends practised the words and spoke them to the teacher whenever they saw her (C9_Ch).

Karen observed the beginning of a lesson in her daughter's classroom on Australia Day: "I found it interesting, the first day [***Marlena***] walked into class, on the wall it said, 'We are Australian'. I thought that was interesting that the teacher had made that generalisation" (C4_P2). Both parents spent time that evening explaining their daughter's joint citizenship to her (C4_P2).

While cultural additives such as "heroes and holidays" are somewhat peripheral and can have limited impact, schools that embrace genuine cultural diversity are generally more successful in developing positive affirmation of intercountry adoptees. However, even within such diverse school communities, evidence of pervasive racist values and entrenched stereotypes can exist, and intra-racial divisiveness can potentially be an issue needing to be addressed.

Teachers and school administrators

The majority of participants in this study were happy overall or very happy with the positive qualities and attributes demonstrated by their children's teachers. In these cases positive relationships and open communication existed between parents, teachers and administrators. Several participants, however, had concerns about

negative qualities and attributes in relation to communication style (including approachability and manner), understanding of adoption-related issues, or professional conduct. In some cases, poor communication with the principal was a more significant issue than communication with the teacher.

Positive teacher qualities and attributes

During the interview, Joanne and Peter described their daughter's teacher as "Experienced, older, dedicated to the kids, really patient, kind, amazing, fantastic, kind and caring, relates well with parents, very professional, held in high regard within the Catholic community, in touch with young kids, probably 45 or so" (C3_P1; C3_P2). Spending significant time supporting her daughter in the classroom alongside this teacher, Joanne observed:

> She never gets cranky with any kid. I never saw her raise her voice. It doesn't matter what kid they are, the naughtiest kid, she'll get them to do what they need to do (C3_P2).

Brett liked the fact that one of his children's teachers was "a real kind of grandmotherly sort … [a] lovely lady" (C4_P1). Renee and Cooper described ***Rick's*** kindergarten teacher as someone who loved all her children, treated them equitably, was demonstrably affectionate and caring, and worked at developing positive relationships (C5_P2; C5_P1).

These qualities and attributes may also be desired by parents of non-adopted children; however, there is a definite tendency toward value placed on calm personalities who are nurturing, patient, understanding and appropriately affectionate, particularly with younger children in the first few years of school. Some of the children confirmed the qualities and attributes that they value in their teachers. For example, ***Richard*** described Mr R as "active and fit" and Miss F as "organised and nice" (Figure 6.16). He also liked it when Mrs F allowed him to bring in personal artefacts such as "my Tazia monkey … photos of us patting a snake … a little collection of little statues" following a visit to his birth country, and the teacher facilitated further discussion

Figure 6.16. Teachers and adoption

(Richard, age 8)

with the other children during "circle time". He appreciated that this teacher allowed and supported him in sharing his homeland experiences (C2_Ch2).

Sarah recalled an upsetting moment that had recently occurred in class. She approached her teacher's desk in tears:

> We were learning about family and we had to write down [things] about family, like, your different types of family members. Then I got a bit upset because it reminded me back to my mother. Then I realised, it doesn't come to me much, but I just thought of something hard. It made me feel, I've got eight more years, and now seven, because I was 10 back then. I've got eight more years, which will take a long time, before I see her.… And when I walked to the teacher, she made me feel better, because she gave me a hug (C2_Ch1).

Sarah's teacher gave her physical and emotional support and showed empathy as she shared personal stories about her own absent child (C2_Ch1).

Negative teacher qualities and attributes

In contrast, several participants were clear about the undesirable qualities and attributes they considered detrimental to or disliked by the children, for example, those who shout at them. Grace said that her daughter "now hates the teacher" in a neighbouring classroom, who yelled at her unfairly, and "***Richard*** doesn't like yelling ones" (C2_P). When Richard was asked if he liked his teacher, he replied, "Yes, [but] sometimes she yells at us" (C2_Ch2). Similarly, ***Joseph*** said, "Yeah, pretty nice. Sometimes they get a bit angry" (C7_Ch2). ***Rick*** and his parents agreed that teachers who shout are a significant barrier to his learning and behaviour at school (C5_P1; C5_P2; C5_Ch).

Others did not appreciate teachers who are dismissive or minimise their concerns about adoption-related issues, including anxiety behaviours and problematic curriculum tasks (C2_P; C5_P2; C4_P1; C10_P), or whom they perceive to act inequitably or unprofessionally with children (C5_P2). These concerns warrant further discussion.

Communication about adoption-related issues

Communication with teachers and administrators about adoption-related issues was of greater concern to some parents than others. For Diane, communication with educators on the whole has been very positive: "I don't feel there is any problem

with me going up and saying, 'Look I'm concerned about this or I think this should be happening'" and so far teachers have also been "pretty good" at passing information on between year levels (C9_P). Leonie described her family as "high profile" within the school, as a result of their uniqueness, but that she has also worked hard at "developing a positive name, so when we do go and complain about something … they will listen" (C7_P1). As her children have matured over time at the same school, Deborah did not feel the need to explain a great deal to teachers:

> It's been pretty casual the whole time. That's our approach, it works for us. I kind of think if we get our knickers in a knot, they're going to get their knickers in a knot and will look for issues (C1_P2).

Grace generally opens the conversation about adoption with ***Richard's*** teacher on February 1, Richard's "Gotcha Day", by explaining the significance of the day they first met their son and how important it is to him. At parent/teacher interviews, she invites teachers to talk with her about any adoption-related issues: "If you ever have a problem, or if you have an issue around it, or if he's ever upset … let me know". Throughout the year she sees teachers as the need arises and finds them generally empathetic. For example, when hearing the meaning of the "Gotcha Day", Richard's teacher responded, "Oh, that's the most beautiful thing I have ever heard". However, Grace found that more complex topics, such as her children's adoption-related anxiety, are not always met with the same understanding. "That same teacher, I'd have to say, at [the] parent/teacher interview, dismissed me when I tried to tell her about his anxiety. I have had that happen to me twice now …from Sarah's [teacher] as well". For Grace, instead of the teacher remarking, "Oh, yes, all kids are like that", she would have appreciated being asked, "Oh, how so?" (C2_P).

Some parents provide teachers with reading materials such as the booklet *Intercountry adoption: Information for teachers* (PASS, 2013). Deborah did this in her children's early years of school but no longer found this necessary, instead trusting the information to be passed on to her children's future teachers. She stated that communication with teachers "has been great" (C1_P2). She chooses a minimalist approach to casually explaining only issues that are the most relevant to her children:

> At the beginning of the year, I will usually take the time to stick my nose in the door for a second with a new teacher and just say, "In case you weren't

> aware, A or M, is internationally adopted. … we might not have an early baby photo". … For M I'll talk about his anxiety levels. "Just be aware that if you speak to him, he might be a bit [out of sorts] for a while. … he feels that rejection so strongly". … "If you are talking terminology, we say birth mother, birth father, we're parents. If you get stuck or something comes up, let me know, I have heaps of resources, and I'm happy to come and chat" (C1_P2).

Karen finds the need to revisit the impact of prior experience on ***Brendon's*** behaviour with his teacher; however, this is well received: "He's been very open in emailing us back and forward and saying … 'any light that you can shed, you know, I'd appreciate it', and afterwards, 'Thank you, I appreciate you pointing that out to me'" (C4_P2). Brendon lacks confidence in new social settings and sometimes struggles to make friends. He does not cope well with change and is getting help to manage his anger. On one occasion, the teacher could not understand why Brendon appears confident, popular and "really show[s] off trying to impress" in class, while telling him that he does not have friends. Karen explained to him: "Really it's Brendon with very low self-esteem, you know, trying to do all these things because he's coming from a place that is not confident" (C4_P2). On another occasion, Brett attempted to explain the difficulties that Brendon was likely to have with a particular family tree activity. However, the teacher

> didn't really get it at all … and I just had to walk away going [shaking his head].… By the end of the year he kind of got it. And so then we've got to start again (C4_P1).

At the end of the year the teacher sent Karen an email saying, "Look, thank you so much for helping me this year with Brendon … to understand where he's come from" (C4_P2).

Parent-teacher relationships

Grace said that seeking employment at her children's school was "the best decision [I] could have made". It has made a big difference to the children's sense of security and to her ability to communicate proactively with teachers. For example, when ***Sarah*** became very upset in class during a discussion about families, the teacher found Grace easily in the school and explained what happened. "As a parent not working there, I wouldn't have got that feedback" (C2_P).

Joanne agreed that the close relationship she had formed with the class teacher as a result of supporting her daughter in the classroom for an extended period of time allowed her to have "personal conversations … very private conversations" about both her daughters' early experiences of trauma. When asked if it would have been more difficult to have those conversations otherwise, she confirmed, "Yes, that's right" (C3_P2). Deborah, also an employee in her children's school, did not think her position made a significant difference in her case (C2_P; C1_P2).

These three parents were educators and/or school employees and therefore the relationships formed with teachers are not necessarily typical of all adoptive parents. In the three cases which follow, relationships with teachers/administrators were not easily developed and communication was difficult.

Communication style (including approachability and manner)

Monica volunteered in her daughter's Year One classroom. She witnessed the teacher's unapproachable and hostile manner towards parents and children. On one occasion she observed, "The teacher was incredibly hostile towards her [the parent] and the little boy really wore it. I saw it happening in the classroom; it got worse, rather than better" (C8_P). Monica witnessed these teacher characteristics on numerous occasions and felt similar hostility herself. She became afraid to approach the teacher about social difficulties her daughter was having with other children in the playground. "We got to the point where the teacher was so hostile to me. The only way that I could communicate with her was through very formal emails" (C8_P). The teacher had already stated in their first parent-teacher interview, "I have already told ***Melissa*** that I don't want her coming to me with any issues she has in the playground because I don't want her to be a dibber-dobber" (C8_P). Monica said that she persisted as classroom volunteer,

> only because I could hardly leave her there. So it got to the point where she would cry on the way to school; she would cry when we got to school. She begged me not to take her most days. On the weekends, she would start on Sunday and cry all day (C8_P).

Monica acknowledged that her daughter "is different. I think she looks different" but that was not her concern. For her, "the fact that the teacher really, adamantly, didn't want to support my daughter" was the main issue. The teacher discouraged communication from parents and children, was demonstrably hostile when required

to communicate, and failed to recognise that Year One children still require social support. According to Monica, there was ultimately a "total breakdown" in communication and both her and her daughter's experience of school was "horrific, awful" (C8_P), leading to a change of school. While adoption-related issues were not an obvious concern for this young student or her mother, poor communication (and lack of support) about her daughter's social needs were identified as important areas of teacher neglect (C8_P).

Professional conduct

Renee identified a female Year One teacher who routinely neglected to give ***Rick*** home readers or spelling lists to bring home (when other children took these home) because he was a "waste of space". When asked to re-confirm what the teacher actually said, Renee stated, "I don't envy you bringing him up. He's a waste of space". Renee followed this conversation up with the principal and Rick was moved immediately to a male teacher's class who later confirmed that he was working, behaviourally and academically, "just fine" for him (C5_P2). Renee recalled another frustrating and unproductive conversation with the first teacher on another occasion:

> She told me that he had attitude and he had to learn to deal with it because, "He thinks he's got rights because he's had adversities. All children have had adversities." She had adversities as a child. Her parents divorced. I said, "I'm sure that's sad. I haven't been there, but you still had a mother and a father, brothers, sisters, aunties, uncles, grandparents, cousins. Well, he had nothing." I said, "Were you physically abused? Well, he has been. So I don't think there's any similarity there. And how old are you?" [She said] "I am 54." "Well, he's 6 years of age" (C5_P2).

School leader openness and support

Renee's experience of communicating with two principals about adoption-related issues showed contrasting outcomes. She gave the booklet *Intercountry adoption: Information for teachers* (PASS, 2013) to her first principal, who Renee said responded: "Oh, I'm not taking any notice of that. It is not written by a psychologist" (C5_P2). This response disappointed Renee who said, "So much of it was pertaining to Rick." At Rick's second school, she gave the booklet to the new principal who indicated: "Oh, yes, great, thank you. I will go through this "(C5_P2). Cooper said that communication with the first principal had become "not so much

difficult, but confrontational" (C5_P1). This is evidenced by numerous email communications between parents and school staff (Docs_14-19). Renee stated that she now feels she is seen as an antagonist: "It's like, 'Oh, here she is again', type of attitude" with both administrators and some of Rick's teachers (C5_P2). Despite face-to-face meetings to try to resolve the situation, both parents agreed that their only recourse was to change schools and preparations were under way at the time of interview (C5_P1).

John and Lana expressed their frustration at the first school principal's inability to obtain the necessary support for ***Sita***, which they perceived as his unwillingness to work cooperatively with them. Thereafter, John "felt anxious" when communicating with the principal, even via email: "I just really wished that the principal that was at that school wasn't the principal when Sita was here, because that's where I felt that most of our blocks were" (C6_P1).

Janet and her husband's "vigorous line of communication" with the principal, requesting ***Melanie*** be placed with her friendship group, was to no avail (Doc_29). Letters and phone calls from both the paediatrician (Doc_27) and the psychologist (Doc_29) were unproductive. Janet stated that both external professionals "spoke to [the principal] on the phone explaining the real medical need for her … [and he] hung up on the telephone" to the counsellor in anger over a letter previously sent to the school (Doc_29; C10_P). Thereafter, communication between Melanie's parents and the school's administration had become strained and unproductive. Janet stated, "There is no on-going dialogue"; the Principal continues to "refute advice from [Melanie's] medical specialists" and offers a "standard response … they are the educators and know what is best" (Doc_29). Janet said she often feels "dismissed" by school staff and treated as a "mentally unstable woman" (C10_P).

Many adoptive parents participate in adoption support group activities, are proactive in providing relevant adoption-related information to schools (Baker, 2013), and seek to collaborate with school administrators and teachers about the needs of their children. In each of these latter three cases, communication with the school leader was unproductive and often confrontational concerning the needs and experiences of the children at school. One family had already changed school systems and school, and two were in the process of changing at the time of interview. This is a matter of significant concern, since parents and administrators who share

realistic expectations and communicate openly to determine appropriate intervention strategies are in the best position to support these children in school.

6.5.3 Childhood development and the adoption experience

This thesis uses a multidisciplinary approach to examining and understanding the complexity of the intercountry adoptee's experience at school. Highlighting issues pertaining to attachment and trauma and the sociocultural context of schools has played a significant part in achieving this goal. Further insight can be gained by considering how the children's level of maturity and exposure to certain adoption-related events within the family may impact on them at school, at unexpected times and ways throughout their development. This will be achieved by examining areas of the curriculum which may challenge some adoptees and how teacher understanding and the children's growing awareness of racial difference may affect the children's experiences at school.

Curriculum and teacher understanding

The Australian curriculum provides opportunities for children to engage with and to appreciate diversity in their school. Teachers who validate and support student diversity through the curriculum, while considering developmental implications for each child, will maximise such opportunities and minimise negative social and emotional harm. The following cases highlight these significant connections through an examination of how some adoptees have engaged with common curriculum activities and how teacher understanding is important.

Family-focused activities

Richard was required to prepare a family tree in his Prep class. He considered including only "Sarah, me, [dad and] the dog. I think he put the fish. He put just what was in his house." However, his mother said, "If he was to do it again now, he might think a bit more about it. But at that age, he didn't even - I don't think he gave it a thought" (CS2_P). Grace was also present in ***Sarah's*** Prep class, when her teacher discussed genetic character traits: "If your mum's got blue eyes, you might have blue eyes" (C2_P). While Grace observed the teacher's discomfort with her obvious *faux pas* in their case, her daughter was "oblivious to the whole conversation" (C2_P). Sarah could not remember completing this unit, but said, "I don't think I understood

back then.… I just thought, mum and dad, just normal. That's my mum, my dad" (C2_Ch1).

Similarly ***Melissa,*** who was used to talking openly about her adoption experience at home from a very young age, wanted to continue the conversation at school. Her mother explained:

> In Prep, I said to the teacher, "She may talk a little bit about it because it's something that we have always talked about at home". And then the teacher rang me and said that they were doing this thing that they were looking at the globe and she said, "I'm from [birth country]. I was born in [birth country]. Abby is my birth mother and she still lives over there" (C8_P).

Monica prepared the teacher to support her daughter with any personal questions that may arise from her peers and the teacher assured her that "kids at this stage, they just want an answer, so they can ask the question and go, 'Oh, yeah, okay'. And that's what happened" (C8_P). In a unit about "Connections" with other countries, ***Andrea*** shared her whole adoption journey with her class, taking in various artefacts, and discussing her birth mother and life in an orphanage. "She was perfectly happy" sharing her story with other children who knew her well (C1_P2). These four children were adopted by age two and had grown up talking with their families about their adoption experience. At this age, both ***Richard*** and ***Sarah*** made no obvious connection between the concepts presented in the Prep activities and their personal experience. Melissa and Andrea's resilient nature and openness at school helped to normalise their experience with other children. As a result, all four children had no difficulty with the early years' family-focused activities.

In contrast, ***Brendon***, who was new to the country and to the school, did not know his peers well. His parents anticipated the challenges he would face when completing a family tree activity for presentation to his Prep class. Brett attempted to explain this to his teacher, but "he didn't really get it at all. I just had to walk away" (C4_P1).

> I just approached him and I said, "You know you've sent home this note saying that we're going to be doing family trees and you want the kids to bring in photos of themselves as babies and bring in photos of their parents

> and those kind of things." I just said to him, "Brendon's going to be affected by this … he's different. He feels different," and his response was, "But all the kids are different. You know, there's kids that don't have parents … that don't have one parent or that they're living with grandparents or aunts and uncles, whatever". … I think he was so focused, being taught every child is different, you have to celebrate their differences without actually recognising that some kids, the difference is the problem. Rather than celebrating the difference they don't want to be different … and yeah, he didn't get it.… I emailed Karen and said, "Well, I tried" (C4_P1).

Brendon possessed photos of himself and his birth father, but was conflicted as to whether or not he should share a photo with his classmates. Brendon lacks confidence and struggles to make eye-contact when presenting information to the class. He decided to omit his photo (C4_P2). ***Rick,*** however, had no early photo of his birth family. Instead, after talking with his Prep teacher, his mother gave him "a photo of a baby from [the same cultural background]" and the first photo they had received of him. According to Renee, "He didn't have issues with that at all" (C5_P2). Clearly, the way in which these children handled these types of activities was influenced by their experience, their established relationships with their peers, their level of comfort in talking about their adoption experience, and by their individual personalities. These elements seem to be further supported by timely and effective communication between parents and teachers.

Historical timelines

Three cases revealed that when teachers are understanding and have positive relationships with parents and children, when advanced notice is given of curriculum topics and activities, adjustments can be made and oversights easily rectified. A Year One History unit required ***Richard*** to bring an item which represented each year of his life. Grace explained to the teacher that Richard did not have anything from his first year and the teacher was flexible and understanding: "Of course you wouldn't … I don't want something from every year. Just two things [are] enough" (C2_P).

Amaris's Grade Two teacher asked the children to include a baby photo in their personal history timeline. Diane and Amaris explained to the teacher that the first photo they had of her was at 16 months of age. According to Diane, the young male teacher's response was, "I'm sorry. That was such a male thing to do. I didn't even think of that. She can just do from Prep through school years". Amaris included

photos from Prep, Year One and Year Two. Diane said, “He was fantastic. It didn’t seem to bother her”. He was a teacher “she absolutely adored” (C9_P).

Andrea’s mother appreciated the opportunity to discuss a historical timeline task with her daughter and to help her consider her options:

> I sat down with her. I said, “OK, things until you turned five. What happened your first year? What do you want to say that’s up until you turned one?” And she said, “Well that’s before you picked me up, isn’t it?” “Yep, so what do you think happened in that time?” And she said, “I would have got teeth”. “You would have got teeth.” “Well I’m going to write that. I got my first tooth”. “Great. What about when you turned two? In that second year” and she said, “You guys picked me up”. I said, “Is that what you want to put?” “Yep, mum and dad picked me up”. So we do leave it very open, but again, it was matter of fact. They’re the facts (C1_P2).

Intercountry adoptees process their personal histories in different ways and at different times, as they seek to integrate this knowledge into their everyday lives. The teacher who is forward thinking, flexible and open to parent involvement, in scaffolding the child through potentially sensitive tasks, is also providing a more flexible approach to the curriculum for all children from diverse backgrounds.

Children’s maturity and the curriculum

As children mature, they tend to think more deeply about their lives and experiences as they engage with the curriculum. In Year Two, ***Richard*** explained that the study of History reminds him of his own history and that he wanted “to learn about how I fit into the world. Yeah, that’s what I want to learn” (C2_Ch2). Grace describes Richard as “a wise old man”, who seems sometimes confused: “He overthinks [and] overcomplicates things”. Concerning his adoption experience: “I think he’s got all the bits but just hasn’t quite fit them all together … . He hasn’t connected all the dots properly yet.… Maybe give him another year ” (C2_P).

In Year Three English literature, Sarah studied the *The Stolen Girl*, a children’s story book which some adoptees today may find confronting or confusing as they compare their own adoption experience to that of the “Stolen Generation” of Indigenous Australians. The teacher advised Grace that this book was being studied, and lent her a copy to read and discuss at home with her daughter. In class, the teacher answered Sarah’s questions “as best she could, without getting complicated”,

correcting any misunderstandings about the difference between the main character's adoption experience and Sarah's experience. "Sarah was happy with the teacher's response [and] moved on" (C2_P). In contrast, ***Rick's*** study of Indigenous Australians did not include this book, nor did it focus on past adoption practices. According to Renee:

> They did quite a bit of work on the Aboriginals and he really took to that. He enjoyed that a lot.… Loved it.… I think maybe it's because he could relate to them not being quite – coming from a similar background to what he came from (C5_P2).

When teachers are sensitive to the backgrounds of the children in their class, they can use their discretion and professional judgement in the selection of literature and other resource materials appropriate for their group of children. When teachers confidently respond to adoption-related issues which arise in class and communicate issues to parents, they are more likely to avoid potentially emotional and embarrassing social interactions for these children in the classroom.

Deborah stated that her family does "not make a fuss" about the various curriculum topics that may prove challenging. "We just say, 'How is this going to work for us?' In the same way anyone would if they were in a foster family or a step family - all different types" (C1_P2). Craig added that they "focus on the solution and not the problem. And not make it a problem" (C1_P1). Despite this positive approach, ***Matthew***, their high achieving and well-behaved son, came home from school one day "cranky" at the way his teacher had handled a question about adoption. During a novel study of *Storm Boy*, another child in the class asked, "What does adopted mean?" to which the teacher responded, "Well, it means when you look after somebody else's child." Matthew had wanted to "smack the table, jump up and say 'that's not true', and explain", but decided not to do so, as "it would have been rude". His mother talked with him about ways to "educate" the teacher; however, she accepted her son's decision simply to "let it go" (C1_P2).

In Year Six, Matthew had to write an autobiography which included an emotional event in his life: "Something that created a lot of feeling" (C1_P2). Deborah had shared with the teacher that her son had recently discovered new information about his birth family:

> His classroom teacher spoke to me, grabbed me just in the playground one day and said, "Look, this is what we are going to do. I thought maybe I might encourage him to write about [new information about] his birth family" … She thought he would write some really good work (C1_P2).

However, Deborah responded:

> No, please don't put it to him as a suggestion. I think it's too raw. Please just let it go. But if he chooses to write on it, just let him. He didn't. He wrote about when his Grandfather passed away, which was [also] very raw and beautiful (C1_P2).

As the teacher had not understood the rawness of the experience to her son, Deborah was pleased that the teacher had "checked in" with her first to avoid a potentially upsetting experience (C1_P2). Matthew's desire to focus on a topic other than his adoption experience was also evident when students were required to select a foreign country to study and share facts with the rest of the class (C1_Ch1). Rather than his birth country, Matthew "chose a different country"; his sister added, "It's good to try something new" (C1_Ch1; C1_Ch2). This case illustrated that the common teaching practice of drawing on children's personal experiences to relate new knowledge may not always result in the best outcome for children from diverse backgrounds. In instances where children are required to draw on early life experience, giving them a choice may be the best option.

Parents of children adopted closer to school age who had experienced language and/or learning difficulties were not aware of the impact of these units or activities on their children as language/learning needs appeared to be more significant than the impact of specific units of work. Janet did, however, state that she would have appreciated some communication home about curriculum units, but this was lacking:

> ***Melanie*** doesn't even have the basic language to be able to tell me what she's done at school. She can't tell me. … Well they don't share much with us, like nothing comes home (C10_P).

Janet indicated that if Melanie had completed challenging units of work at school, she "would be oblivious to it. She wouldn't have understood what was being asked" (C10_P). These types of curriculum units and activities were more concerning or problematic for some families than for others. Attachment security combined with

timely communication with teachers and advanced notice of activities and assessments minimised potential difficulties.

Homeland visits

In year Three, ***Sarah's*** family began planning their return visit to the children's birth country. During that time, Grace had "trouble getting her to school every day … she was upset when I was leaving her. She would be crying." According to Grace, when the teacher took Sarah for a walk around the playground and asked her what was wrong, she said, "Oh, I just miss Mum and Dad." To her mother, Sarah confided that she was scared of "plane crashes". Grace concluded, "I don't think that was much to do with the school, but it was just coming out at school" (C2_P).

In Year Five, following the homeland visit, talk in class about brothers and sisters triggered a deep sadness in Sarah and she confided in her teacher about the biological sibling she had never seen. When Sarah recalled her emotional response to the class activity, she explained, "It only comes sometimes when I feel alone and my family is a bit upset … [it's] not very often" (C2_Ch1). Her brother ***Richard*** was in his Prep year at school when the return visit occurred and he learned more about his birth family. As previously mentioned, this had an impact on his thinking and understanding about his adoption experience and how he "fit[s] into the world" (C2_Ch2).

Towards the end of her Prep year, almost every day on the drive to school, ***Melissa*** would ask her mother to "tell me my story". Needing to understand her adoption became paramount. Between Prep and Year One, following a homeland visit, Melissa shared her concerns about her birth mother, Abby, with Monica:

> "I'm thinking about Abby a lot". Certainly when she first started school, she was saying things like, "I couldn't concentrate today because I was thinking about Abby all day and I have been worrying about her … so I didn't listen at school and I couldn't concentrate" (C8_P).

Monica explained that for her daughter, her adoption experience is "something emerging, something being processed. I think that is every day". While the homeland visit was a very positive experience for Melissa, it did trigger this new level of consciousness which does sometimes impact on her at school (C8_P).

Children's growing awareness of racial/cultural differences

Many intercountry adoptees' understanding of race and culture, in the context of their adoption experience, develops with maturity (Brodzinsky, 2011; 1998; Fishman & Harrington, 2007; McGinn, 2007), which may be evident in either positive or negative experiences at school. ***Rick*** was oblivious to the differences in skin colour in the younger grades at school. Renee said, "Colours, we are all the same colour", when describing his level of understanding (C5_P2). However, both Rick and his parents identified his growing understanding and resentment of racial vilification and perceived discrimination and targeting at school. This became more obvious when he was approximately eight years old (C5_P1; C5_P2).

Amaris's perception of racial difference also changed with maturity. Diane explained that, as a young child, Amaris did not distinguish between herself and other children:

> …when my niece was born she looked the spitting image of me and we were looking at photos and mum was saying, "Oh, she looks so much like you Diane", and Amaris says, "But she looks like me, too". I said, "In what way does she look like you?" She said, "Well she's got a round face" (C9_P).

Since starting school, Amaris sometimes comments on observable differences: "Such and such is in my class and he's got the same coloured skin as me" (C9_P). This was also evidenced in her drawing and conversations about herself, her friends and her Grandmother (see Figure 6.17). Unlike Rick, ***Amaris's*** observations were indicative of a natural growing awareness and did not highlight any issues of concern at school. The cultural diversity within her school may have helped her with this.

Figure 6.17. Me, my family and school … a happy moment

(Amaris, age 10)

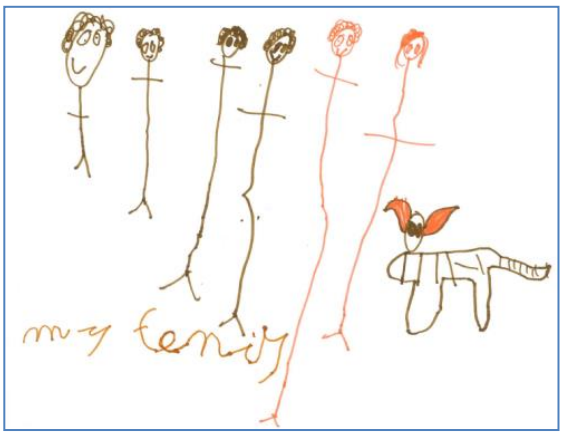


Figure 6.18. My family: Colour differences

(Joseph, age 7)

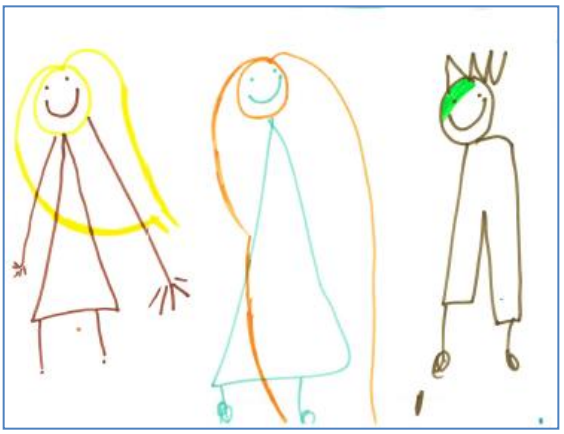


Figure 6.19. My family

Marlena (left) and her two adopted siblings with Caucasian hair styles and colouring

(Marlena, age 8)

Both ***Joseph*** (C7) and ***Marlena's*** (C4) drawings and conversations identified both real and imagined perspectives on colour difference. Joseph accurately drew the children in his family a darker colour to his parents (Figure 6.18).

Marlena, however, imagined herself and her adopted siblings with Caucasian hair colouring and styles (Figures 6.19). Marlena (who has dark hair) commented, "I chose yellow for my hair". When asked why, she replied, "Well I just don't really like my hair sometimes. I like other people's hair". For Joseph, drawing family members' different colours appeared to be merely a statement of fact, while Marlena described her Caucasian friend's colouring as "vanilla" and expressed her desire to look more like her.

These examples support previous adoption research (see Brodzinsky et al., 1998; McGinn, 2007; Rosenberg, 1992) which connects the adoptee's experience to Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. For example, in the early years of school, children adopted at a young age may be happy to share their story with others at school. Depending on their pre-adoption experience, children adopted at an older age may be less likely to share their early life experiences publicly. As younger adoptees mature, gain knowledge and further experience (for example, through homeland visits) in relation to their adoption, processing and sharing information about themselves with others may become more intimidating. While potentially challenging curriculum tasks may be beyond the comprehension or concern of some younger children, as they develop, their adoption experience may evoke more

emotional responses. Teacher empathy and open advanced communication with parents (and the children themselves) about pending curriculum activities may assist teachers to implement the curriculum with inclusive goals in mind and prevent unnecessary discomfort for these and other children from diverse backgrounds.

Matthew's "Own choice" topic for this study was a heartfelt letter to teachers (Figure 6.20). This message and the conversation which followed are insightful, as they reveal that even children adopted at a young age may need and expect teachers to be knowledgeable and understanding about their adoption experience, and willing and able to support them at school if the need arises.

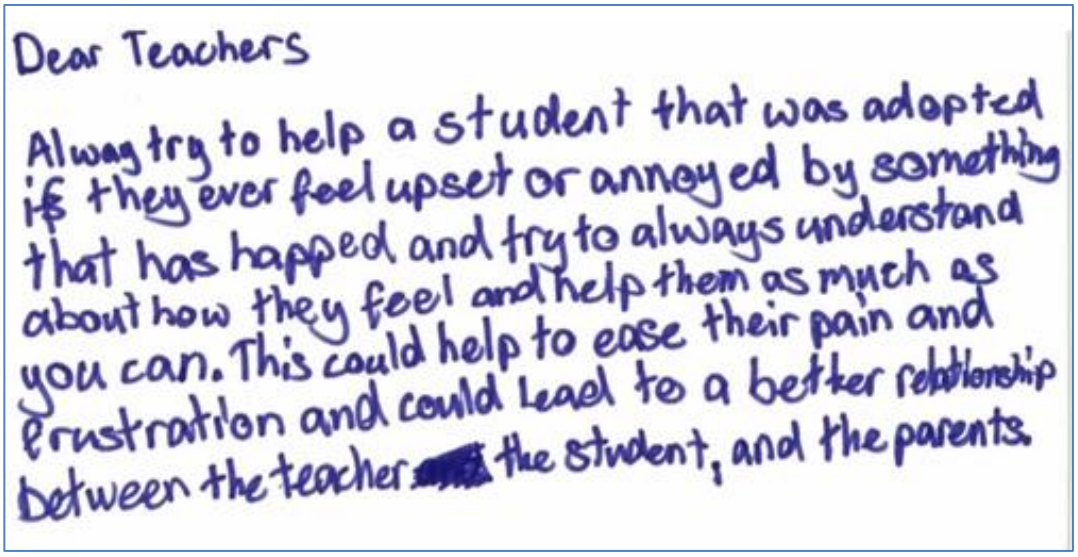


Figure 6.20. Own choice: A letter to teachers

(Matthew, age 12)

The ensuing conversation went as follows:

Researcher: (pointing to the word "pain"). What sort? [of pain].

Matthew: Pain about how they feel about why they were adopted and how the teacher can help to make them understand about why they were adopted, and to try to help them to understand.

Researcher: Is that to help you understand or is it to help other kids understand?

Matthew: It will help the students who were adopted to understand why they were adopted and the circumstances that their birth parents could have been in to force them to put them up for adoption.

Researcher: And is that something your parents talk to you about or would you like teachers to talk to you about that more?

Matthew: My parents.

Researcher: Would it help if teachers understood some of that stuff?

Matthew: Yes.

This multicase study supports clinical adoption research which draws on developmental theories to argue that children's understanding of their adoption experience and of where they "fit into the world" increases as they mature, and this has implications for the way they engage with certain activities across the school years. Age at adoption and attachment opportunity may affect the degree to which children manage activities such as family trees, personal historical timelines and autobiographies. External events such as homeland visits or finding new information about birth family members may act as triggers for deeper introspection at different ages and stages of schooling. Furthermore, cultural interpretations of traditional curriculum units in the social context of school may affect these children, as can their growing awareness of racial and cultural difference, and this may require additional teacher understanding and support, and communication with parents.

6.6 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The majority (nine) of the children in this multicase study had positive experiences of school. Four children had mixed experiences and two had very negative experiences. Positive experiences were generally associated with younger age at adoption, and open, more casual parental approaches with educators, who were accepting and encouraging of parents' knowledge and involvement in supporting their children at school. Positive relationships between parents and teachers made a significant difference to the children's school experience. Multicultural schools with access to specialist staff seemed more able to support the children socially and academically.

Mixed experiences were mostly positive, with the exception of teacher understanding of attachment issues, anxiety-related behaviours in children adopted under two years of age, and isolated experiences of bullying, racism or intrusive comments/questions from peers and sometimes teachers. School culture and community attitudes, and teacher characteristics and attitudes, influenced some parents' selection of school and school system.

Negative experiences were associated in most cases with age at adoption (over three years), where children with high needs experienced pre-adoption abandonment, institutionalisation, trauma and/or neglect. This impacted on children's school experience in various ways which were not always understood by teachers and administrators. Difficulties included agreement between parents and school about age/year level placement/progression; timely access to appropriate assessment and support; language development and learning, self-esteem; making friends; health problems and more severe anxiety-related behaviours. Lack of advice from government authorities regarding school selection for children with high needs contributed to the challenges faced by some families.

Other relevant findings included the influence of children's stage of development (maturity, growing awareness of racial difference, personality, resilience) on their school experience. In addition, certain adoption-related events within the family impacted on some children at school in unexpected ways. Teacher awareness and understanding influenced the way in which potentially sensitive curriculum topics were implemented and the degree to which they triggered emotional responses in some children.

Chapter 7: Discussion

7.1 INTRODUCTION

This study has addressed two research questions: What are the primary school experiences of intercountry adoptees, from the perspectives of adoptive parents and children; and how do the early life experiences of intercountry adoptees impact on their school experience? It has done this by analysing themes centring on the children's early life experiences, their transition to and throughout school, and on the various experiences gained in their primary schools. A multidimensional theoretical framework which encapsulates relevant thinking about attachment, trauma, child development and social construction has been applied to the analysis of data. Methods and tools acknowledged and catered for the diverse backgrounds and needs of this under-represented minority group of children in Australian schools.

Findings from the focus groups demonstrated that intercountry adoptees' school experiences are diverse, ranging from positive to negative with a general perception that adoptees' experiences are neither better nor worse than, but rather "different" from, their non-adopted peers. Case study contexts revealed some commonalities and differences in general experiences between adoptive families. Most (nine) of the children in the multicase study had positive experiences of school. Four children had mixed (positive and negative) experiences, while two had very negative experiences since starting school.

Attachment and child development theories substantiate children's positive experiences which were often associated with younger age at adoption, time in the adoptive family, and the associated attachment opportunity prior to commencing school. Social constructionist perspectives indicate that children's sense of belonging to school was often associated with positive interpersonal relationships and the intersubjective understanding that existed between school personnel, parents, children and their peers. This included school leader openness and empathy, and positive teacher attitudes, which led to effective communication and interaction between parents and educators. Academic success for children with particular learning needs was linked to access to knowledgeable specialist staff in larger

metropolitan schools. When language was prioritised as an essential social and cultural tool positive school experiences occurred for both younger and older-placed adoptees. Cultural differences were more commonly normalised and experiences shared in multicultural schools.

Mixed experiences were mostly positive, with a few exceptions. Difficulties related to teacher understanding of attachment issues and anxiety-related behaviours and isolated experiences of bullying, racism or intrusive comments/questions from peers and sometimes teachers. Curriculum topics related to family and personal histories challenged some, but not all, adoptees. School culture and community attitudes towards "other race" children, as well as teacher characteristics and attitudes, were identified as defining variables which influenced parents in their choice of school and school system.

Negative experiences in particular emphasise the critical nature of social negotiation on childhood development. These were more commonly associated with older age at adoption (over three years), time in country, and ongoing effects of traumatic pre-adoption experience. Difficulties in school were in the areas of language development and learning, socialisation, self-esteem and more severe anxiety-related behaviours and health issues which were not always understood by educators. Other areas of concern were associated with disparities in age/year level placement and progression in relation to chronological versus social/emotional age. Access to timely and appropriate assessment and support for children with high needs, as well as problematic communication between parents/teachers/principal, sometimes resulted in conflict, leading to one or more school changes. Lack of advice from government authorities regarding school selection for children with high needs contributed to the challenges faced by some families. This study highlights the potentially destructive impact of inflexible institutionalised practices on highly traumatised children, and the importance of intersubjective understanding in relation to children's development across a range of domains. An exceptional case where a school-aged adoptee with high learning needs had positive experiences and achieved success at school highlighted what is possible when parents, the school, external professionals and the relevant government child safety authority work together to support the child.

While the data from the research generally aligned with existing international literature, a number of additional insights emerged. As a synthesis of the findings of the focus groups and the multicase study, this chapter will discuss the key issues to emerge from the data, both to show the correlation with the literature and to propose some ways forward for teacher/school implementation. The key issues to emerge were the significance of age at adoption and pre-adoption experience, transition to school and managing the school experience.

7.2 SYNTHESIS OF SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

How do the early life experiences of intercountry adoptees impact on their school experience?

7.2.1 Age at adoption and pre-adoption experience

Significance, attachment and trauma

This study supports previous international research which argues that age at adoption and pre-adoption experience influence a child's post-adoption attachment, adjustment and ongoing development, and these children may need additional assistance at school (Gunnar et al., 2007; Julian, 2013; Rutter, 1998; Rutter, Colvert et al., 2007; Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1996a; Verhulst, 2000). While some distinctions have been made between the long-term educational and behavioural outcomes for children reared in better quality orphanages in some Asian countries (Dalen, 2002; Tan et al., 2007, 2010), the majority of studies have focused predominantly on the adoption of children from significantly deprived institutions in Eastern Europe (Albers et al,. 1997; Groza & Ryan, 2002, Groze & Ileana, 1996; Gunnar et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 1992; Miller & Hendrie, 2000; Wilson, 2003). Consequently, they do not adequately assist the majority of adoptive families and educators in Australia to understand the impact of pre-adoption experience on children who have come from other parts of the world and from varying pre-adoption environments. This study helps to fill this gap.

A meta-analysis of attachment in intercountry adoptees conducted by van den Dries et al., (2008) argued that disorganised attachment is more likely to occur in children adopted over the age of 12 months. However, findings in this multicase study (in which the youngest child was adopted at 4 months while the oldest was estimated to be 6 years 11 months) suggest that attachment capacity is dependent on

the combination of significantly more variables than age at adoption. Social factors such as quality of pre- and post-adoption care and experiences (including school experiences) and attachment opportunities (see also Neimann & Weiss, 2011; Smyke et al., 2010) may be even more significant than age at adoption in relation to school success. For example, ***Sarah*** (adopted under two) and ***Sienna*** (adopted at 6½ years) were reportedly both well cared for in long term foster care families in their birth countries. ***Joseph*** (adopted at 4½ years) was cared for by elderly grandparents and extended family members prior to adoption. Both Sienna and Joseph were well supported during their first school experience in their birth countries and Joseph achieved good academic outcomes. All three children appeared to have close relationships with their adoptive parents and siblings, enjoyed school in Australia and were experiencing success in their current schools. In addition, a transition plan which incorporated attachment opportunity between Sienna and her new mother supported her during her first year in an Australian school. These cases revealed the potential for positive and optimistic outcomes for children adopted older than 12 months of age (including closer to school age) where optimal pre- and post-placement physical and social conditions exist.

This study extended the understanding of attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969, 1980) to the pre-adoption experience and attachment opportunity of internationally adopted children. ***Sita, Melanie*** and ***Rick***, who were adopted between the ages of 3½ and approximately seven years, experienced one or more Type I or Type II traumas (see Chapter Three) which typically result in severe stress (Cook et al., 2005; Ford & Courtois, 2009, 2013; Terr, 1991). Collectively, these included abandonment and neglect, various forms of abuse experienced at critical developmental periods, witnessing or experiencing horrific events, and lack of attachment opportunity to a primary caregiver in either an institutional or a foster care setting. All three children experienced significant difficulties at school and advances in neuroscience research shed light on the complex nature and ongoing impact of trauma on these children's development (Perry, 2001; Twardosz, & Lutzker, 2009; Ziegler, 2011).

Despite disadvantaged beginnings, however, findings also highlight these children's capacity for resilience "when their social and physical context radically changes" (Gunnar et al., 2000, p. 678; see also McGuinness, et al., 2000), and argue

that this is true not only in terms of home life conditions, but also when accord exists between child, parents and educational context (see below: "Managing the School Experience"). For example, three parents in two focus groups home-schooled their children and anxiety issues experienced in the school setting were eliminated. Several case study families changed schools when parents deemed that the first school (and second school in one case) could not cater for their children's needs. In Sita's and Melissa's cases, improved social and emotional well-being and early signs of academic improvement were evident in both girls following the change in schools. While traumatic attachment disruption prior to adoption is clearly detrimental, this study shows that significant improvement is possible with later strategic care.

Anxiety-related behaviour

Previous studies have tended to focus on post-institutionalised behaviours demonstrated by children adopted at an older age, and unhelpful terms such as "autistic-like" (see Gindis, 2008; Federici, 1998; Hoksbergen et al., 2005; Rutter, Colvert et al., 2007) have commonly been used to describe them. Recent research, however, provides neurobiological bases for understanding the development of Executive Function (EF) in adoptees as it relates to the effects of poor early attachment on brain development and the greater likelihood of inattentive or overactive behaviours as well as chronic stress in these children (Barrasso-Catanzaro & Eslinger, 2016; Merz et al., McCall, 2016; Audet & Le Mare, 2010; Helder et al., 2016; Kreppner et al., 2010). Such understanding emerged in this study, which provides additional insights into possible anxiety-related behaviours demonstrated by both older and younger adoptees which sometimes impact on their school experience.

Participants in both the focus groups and the multicase study identified behaviours in children which included attention-seeking or unsafe behaviours, sensory processing difficulties, and fear of rejection or abandonment (including feelings of not fitting in or being excluded). These were sometimes manifested in "escapism" from classrooms or school, anxiety about going to school, or difficulty managing extreme bouts of anger (before, during and/or after school). Several examples were clearly evident where implicit and/or explicit memories (Seigel, 1999) were deeply embedded and strongly felt by older adoptees, and certain "feelings and frightening sensations" (Ziegler, 2011, p. 34) had ongoing and lasting

effects. Several older children were able to voice their fears to their parents in relation to prior experiences. Examples included ***Melanie's*** heightened response to sensory stimulus and her fear of snakes in the toilet, as well as previous beatings in a foster home, and ***Sita's*** fear of black toilet seats. The significance of stored memory could also help to explain ***Rick's*** ongoing anxiety about adults who shout and ***Amari's*** early fears of lumps in her bed.

Additional psychosocial factors (Erikson, 1959; 1963) such as "expectant" anxiety or anticipatory stress (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991, p. 336; Sapolsky, 2004) were evident in both older and younger adoptees. For example, Melanie (adopted at 6 years and 4 months) could not cope with either parent being anywhere out of sight, and this continued for some time. For ***Matthew, Richard*** and ***Sarah*** (adopted between one and two years), separation from family members heightened concerns about family security and permanence at different times throughout primary school, and this seemed to go beyond the common experience of separation anxiety felt by non-adopted children starting school. Considering that most intercountry adoptees have experienced at least two previous separations (from birth parents and/or primary carers), this is not surprising. Clearly, the psychological impact of early attachment disruption and traumatic experience has ongoing and lasting effects on children's development and on their subjective and social constructions of reality (Gergen, 1985). In contrast, interviews suggested that ***Joseph*** (adopted at 4½ years) and ***Andrea*** (adopted at 16 months) had outgoing personalities and their capacity for resilience appeared more significant than age at adoption. Other variables such as parenting styles, family openness with children about their adoption experience (Brodzinsky, 2006), and being a younger sibling to older adoptees, appeared to influence some children's resilience at school. However, these were not specifically investigated in this study.

Furthermore, some children who experienced relational and self-regulatory difficulties received a number of different diagnoses (Terr, 1991) and research indicates that conditions are sometimes misdiagnosed (Cook et al., 2005; Perry et al., 1995). One focus group parent, for example, identified a range of medical diagnoses given to her son, including Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and some traits of Asperger Syndrome. Hopefully, recent attempts to broaden the definition of PTSD in the DSMV-V to include complex

trauma (Kliethermes et al., 2014) will lead to a more accurate diagnosis by practitioners, the removal of unhelpful labels in the research, and more appropriate, timely support for children. In light of the uncertainty which exists around terminology and diagnosis, it is understandable that challenging behaviours exhibited by some children at school may be misunderstood by educators and managed inappropriately as deliberate defiance (see Howard, 2013).

What are the primary school experiences of intercountry adoptees, from the perspective of parents and children?

7.2.2 School transitions

School selection, age/year level placement and advice

Despite research which indicates that adoptive parents express concerns about the challenges their children face at school (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2010; Howard et al., 2004; Judge, 2004; PASQ, 2013), this study highlighted that adoptive parents also prioritise the protective factors that an education system or school offers their children. Age at adoption, related individual needs, and institutionalised practices influenced decisions about school selection. For example, finding a school which was flexible in terms of year-level placement for school-age adoptees was a priority for some families who expressed a need for further advice and support to negotiate this.

Parents of children adopted at a young age generally sought no assistance in relation to starting school beyond the advice and resources available through adoption support groups, or from their own research. Meetings with teachers early in the school year (particularly prominent in the early years of school, while diminishing in higher grades) often facilitated conversations about relevant adoption-related issues such as the use of adoption-sensitive language in the classroom, anticipated comments and questions from other children, and family-focused and personal history units in the curriculum. In some cases, anxiety triggers and emotional responses resulting from the children's adoption journey were discussed (Brodzinsky et al., 1992). Social constructionist perspectives identify this approach as an attempt to gain mutual understanding about the symbolic representation of experience through language and discourse (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Burr (2015, p. 52) argues that "language and our use of it, far from simply describing the world,

both constructs the world as we perceive it and has real consequences". Generally, parents perceived intersubjective understandings as crucial to their children's success at school. When teachers and school administrators were receptive to discussing attachment, trauma and anxiety-related issues, and parents were confident in doing so, greater empathy and better communication between home and school followed. However, when dialogue around these complex and multifaceted concepts was objectified, dismissed or not understood "maximum detachment" from the children's everyday lives ensued (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p.55). In these instances, ineffectual social interactions, scepticism, or assumptions based on personal knowledge or experiencewere evident.

Significantly, the same issues occurred for children adopted closer to school age; however, discussions about curriculum or potential comments and questions generally gave way to more urgent priorities. An important consideration for parents of school-aged adoptees was the choice of school and appropriate age/year level placement. This study supports previous educational and psychological perspectives in the literature which identify the potential negative long-term outcomes for children who start school before they are developmentally ready (Appleyard et al., 2005; Juang & Invernizzi, 2012). Current Queensland state government policy mandates that transition strategies must take into account the unique needs of each child, including their diverse background experiences and the impact that this can have on different rates of learning and development (Powell, 2010). This study affirms that age, a biological factor, is only one consideration in the assessment of school readiness (Powell, 2010), particularly when there is a significant disparity between social/emotional age and chronological age in trauma survivors (Becker-Weidman, 2009a). Despite the research which warns of the cumulative risk for later retention of children who fail to meet year level standards (Huang, 2014; D. Martin, 2011; Meisels & Liaw, 1992; Morrison & Ieong On No, 2007), this study provided evidence that some school principals may not be aware of the ramifications of their decision to place older adoptees in classes solely on the basis of age. Clearly, there is further work to be done to develop a more holistic understanding of the needs of some older intercountry adoptees as they commence school.

Assessment and accessing timely support at school

The issue of effectual assessment of needs and provision of timely and appropriate support emerged from both focus groups and multicase study as a crucial area in need of urgent attention. Younger-age adoptees in this study demonstrated the full spectrum of abilities in school, which may be comparable to non-adopted children, as achievement levels ranged from very high achievement to moderate difficulties, particularly with language, literacy and numeracy. Determining the extent to which identified difficulties related to language loss and acquisition is beyond the scope of this study. However, research which identifies that parents often seek additional tutoring services for reading problems and support with second language learning, as well as special education services for learning difficulties, speech and hearing problems, and behavioural difficulties (Howard & Smith, 2003; Howard et al., 2004; Judge, 2004), suggests that these difficulties may be impacted by the children's early adoption-related experiences.

This study confirms that older-placed adoptees with high language support needs, who experienced significant pre-adoption trauma and developmental delays, were in urgent need of support, which in some cases was beyond the capacity of schools. The experiences of three girls adopted at six years and older were evidence of this. Where early, appropriate intervention and ongoing support (including ESL and speech and language therapy) were available, ***Sienna*** had positive experiences at school. The opposite was true in two other cases. When assessment was postponed, and targeted intervention was suspended due to concerns about standardised testing of children without adequate English language skills (Elleseff, 2011), or where support was not accessible due to funding/eligibility constraints, ***Melanie*** and ***Sita*** experienced ongoing social, emotional and academic difficulties at school. Compounding the standardised testing dilemma, external professional assessments confirmed that Sienna had "significant core language difficulties (greater than expected due to her ESL), and poor working memory" (Doc_4); and Sita's language needs were "not consistent with typical bilingual language learning" but were far below that expected for an ESL learner (Doc_23). This confirms existing research which argues that intercountry adoptees are not bilingual learners (Glennen 2002; Glennen & Masters, 2002; Gindis, 2005), but rather second-first language learners (Roberts et al., 2005; Tan et al., 2011) and standardised tests are unlikely to provide

accurate results for these children (Elleseff, 2011; Glennen, 2002). Furthermore, Melanie and Sita had significant difficulties as a result of rapid language loss and slower language acquisition (Glennen et al., 2011; Jean-Baptiste, 2012), and this manifested itself in extreme frustration, difficulties in coping and sometimes overwhelming behavioural responses. The complete loss of language as a result of the "language switch" phenomenon (Jean-Baptiste, 2012) was a debilitating experience for these children and distressing for both the children and their parents who endeavoured to support them. Clearly, accurate and timely remedial action is needed to cater for these children's language development needs.

This study revealed the great variety of distinctive individual needs that must be taken into account when determining the level and suitability of support needed by intercountry adoptees in school. Clearly, no one size fits all. Schools and parents have attempted to provide a variety of support mechanisms, and for children with low to moderate needs, these may be accommodated through diversification practices in lesson design and classroom practices. However, the strong perspectives of participants in relation to older-placed adoptees were that, in most cases, school support and intervention is inappropriate, ineffective and clearly inadequate. This is an area which requires further attention, and needs to be incorporated into the overall management of the school experience.

7.2.3 Managing the school experience

An examination of other associated school experiences provided additional insights into the subjective and intersubjective perceptions of participants and the impact of institutionalised practices (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) on children's experiences at school. The gamut of school experiences revealed academic considerations, cultural and social issues, and implications for school personnel involved in the process.

Academic considerations

This study has reinforced the inextricable link between language and learning in the overall academic experience (Dalen, 2002; Gindis, 2005; Glennen, 2006; Meese, 2002) and the significance of early assessment and intervention for some intercountry adoptees (Baker, 2013; Glennen, 2002; 2007). In addition, socially constructed experiences in relation to some curricular (family trees, personal

histories and timelines, autobiographies, Indigenous histories, various novel studies) and co-curricular activities (Grandparents' Day) had the potential to upset and disorient some, but not all, of the children (Meese, 2002; Ng, 2006; Schoettle, 2003; Wood & Ng, 2001). The level of concern was largely dependent on the individual child's subjective positioning (personality, prior experience, knowledge or lack of knowledge about birth family), and the way that families approached the task with their children (listening to their child's wishes; discussing options and solutions; normalising the adoptive family as another "type" of family). It was also dependent on intersubjective understanding resulting from parent/teacher communication in relation to the task or activity. In most cases, timely communication between parents and teachers and a flexible approach to common tasks helped to overcome potential difficulties.

Findings revealed that Attachment Theory and Erikson's Psychosocial Theory help to explain the connections between intercountry adoptees' capacity to trust or mistrust the security of family, their developing self-image and sense of industry or inferiority, as well as implications for developing adolescent identity (Erikson, 1959, 1963, 1968, 1980; Vygotsky, 1998). For example, ***Melissa, Andrea*** and ***Richard,*** all of whom had lived several years with their adoptive families prior to starting school, generally trusted the security of their adoptive status and were comfortable talking about their adoption experience and homeland visits at school.

Social constructionist perspectives also help to understand how younger-placed adoptees in particular, construct their identity out of culturally available discourses which draw upon communication with others (Burr, 2015) both at home and at school. As the children moved through middle school towards adolescence, class discussions about family, adoption themes in novel studies (*The Stolen Girl; Storm Boy*), or global issues (refugees, immigration), as well as sharing autobiographical information, were managed by the teacher with varying degrees of accuracy and sensitivity. For example, ***Matthew's*** Year 7 teacher's explanation to the class of what it meant to be adopted confronted the identity he had developed within his adoptive family with devastating emotional consequences. The challenge for teachers, in this study it seemed, was how to normalise the adoption experience in the social context of the classroom. Parents' perceptions were that some teachers were more equipped

and more confident than others to support the children in class when adoption-related topics arose in the course of units of study.

Cultural and social issues

This study supports the literature which asserts that transracial adoptees "are not immune from racism" (Williams, 2003, p. 144), that children do experience racial actions or comments at school (Hugh & Reid, 2000), and that sometimes school personnel are the key "perpetrators", often through inadvertence (Hübinette & Tigervall, 2009, p. 346). Findings provided evidence of institutional racism consistent with the literature (Aveling, 2007; Charles, et al., 2014; Hollinsworth, 1998). These included reductionist attitudes towards racial discrimination/victimisation or treating everyone "the same" (Aveling, p. 79); tokenistic approaches to multicultural education; standardised testing (or lack of appropriate assessment) of ESFL learners; insensitivity in curriculum implementation and resource selection, and the existence of assumptions, generalisations and stereotypes. On a more personal level, some children experienced bullying which affected their self-esteem and sense of belonging at school. A lack of intersubjective understanding (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Duranti, 2010) led to intrusive comments and questions about their personal histories and experiences, by other children and teachers. In some cases, teaching staff made harmful judgements and generalisations based on their personal experiences, for example, as an immigrant, or a person who had experienced family disruption. These experiences were upsetting for the child (and the parent) and the negative impact on their self-confidence and happiness was significant. Several older-placed adoptees had difficulty making friends, particularly where distinctions in chronological age and social/emotional competence were apparent or when they perceived that the colour of their skin was a barrier to inclusion.

Despite these difficulties, however, this study also found opportunities for optimism, particularly pertaining to the cultural composition of local communities and schools, the selection of school, the school leadership and school culture. Overall, children who lived in regional or metropolitan multicultural communities and attended schools with significantly high multicultural student populations expressed an increased sense of belonging, were less likely to "feel different", and valued their transcultural friendships. When this occurred, positive constructions of

difference were evident, and notions of "colour blindness" minimised. Friendships with children from a range of cultural backgrounds served to validate and authenticate their sense of belonging to two cultures (Williams, 2003, p. 144). These children demonstrated positive interracial attitudes, prioritised the personal qualities of their friends over racial/cultural difference (Allport, 1954; Banks & Banks, 2010; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005), and found enjoyment in sharing information about their families and/or countries of origin. Adoptive status was effectively not an issue.

Issues of race and culture were not straightforward. Findings confirmed social constructionist perspectives that the interpretation of knowledge is both culturally and historically constructed (Burr, 2015; Cromby & Nightingale, 1999; Gergen, 1985) and intersects with social class (Charles, et al., 2014). Numerous examples were evident where views on social class across cultures and personal experiences influenced perspectives. Examples included refugee student populations implying poorer behavioural standards in one school; a Caucasian immigrant teacher's view of dark-skinned children from their country of origin; an immigrant teacher's personal immigration experience affecting assumptions made; adoptive status versus refugee status of children from the same country; and class/race attitudes within a private school community. All of these occurrences impacted mainly on parents' perceptions and, in one case, were reflected in a child's response and drawing. Banks and Banks (2010) assert that awareness of the existence of these types of issues may lead to greater empathy in schools.

Racism clearly exists in Australian schools (Greco, Priest & Paradies, 2010; Mansouri & Jenkins, 2010). Some principals give insufficient credence to systemic and institutional practices which marginalise minority race students, are often reluctant to acknowledge the existence of racism in their schools (Aveling, 2007), or grapple with the intersection of race, culture, class, gender and religion to find workable solutions to complex issues (Charles, et al., 2014). Authentic multicultural education needs to go far beyond notions of "heroes and holidays" celebrations (Banks & Banks, 2010, p. 61; Lee et al., 2002), incidental flag flying, song and dance, "boomerang or didgeridoo" displays (Aveling, 2007, p. 80), but should encompass many different facets of social and cultural awareness and inclusion (Banks & Banks, 2010). While some children in this study enjoyed the entertainment factor or the opportunity to share culinary examples, costumes or artefacts from their

country of origin, others avoided these discreet gestures that were far removed from their everyday realities. Focus group participants generally agreed that more meaningful approaches to Global Education through the curriculum may assist all students to gain a greater understanding of and respect for cultural diversity; help to alleviate cultural stereotypes, assumptions and generalisations, and reduce racial discrimination and the associated bullying which continues towards their children. Significantly, parents' perceptions were that the school principal had an important role to play in modelling empathy and fostering a school culture which promoted positive interracial attitudes within the school and wider community.

Implications for school personnel

Most parents in this study acknowledged the expectations placed on teachers to cater for the diverse needs of all the children in the classroom, and the range of skills, abilities and attributes required to do this (AITSL, 2013; Carrington et al., 2012). These parents expressed their appreciation and respect for the work of teachers. While expectations varied, it was generally agreed that the teacher was integral to the children's school experience and this is most likely true for all children (Hattie, 2003). The significance of personal qualities, teacher traits and skills, attitude, sensitivity and awareness, were emphasised by most participants and reinforced in the literature (Baker, 2013; Taymans et al., 2008). Teachers, who were nurturing and empathetic, organised and clear in their expectations, and who communicated effectively with parents and children were often preferred and even sought after by adoptive parents. While it could be argued that developmentally, many young children may appreciate nurturing teachers, older adoptees also benefited from the empathy and sensitivity demonstrated by some teachers in relation to their adoption experience.

Most parents generally understood that teachers' backgrounds and experience may preclude them from having the knowledge and understanding of pre-adoption experience or the ongoing effects of attachment and trauma (Baker, 2013; Donalds, 2012; Meese, 2002; Taymans et al., 2008). However, several indicated that they occasionally felt the need to advocate on their children's behalf and appreciated teachers who were open and willing to learn about such matters. When schools acknowledged parents as a key resource (PASS, 2013) in the management of their children's school experience, the outcome for the children was more favourable.

Hence, participants valued positive interpersonal relationships between home and school, as well as teachers' capacity to communicate and acquire knowledge and understanding of adoption-related issues.

The literature agrees that education professionals generally do not have an understanding of the impact of institutionalisation on adoptees, the implications of second-first language learning, or the socio-emotional implications of adoption issues that arise in the classroom (Baker, 2013; Donalds, 2012; Meese, 2002; Taymans et al., 2008). It has been argued that teachers do not know how to cater for the linguistic and cultural diversity in classrooms (Edwards, 2010), and when early language delays are underestimated or overlooked this may inappropriately lead to a "deficit view" of a child's abilities (Carrington et al., 2012, p. 13).

This study confirmed that these findings are valid, but that shared understanding and interpretation of knowledge varies across different social/school contexts (Burr, 2015; Cromby & Nightingale, 1999; Gergen, 1985), and this was evident in the inconsistencies between schools. For example, ***Amaris*** and ***Sienna*** received a high degree of understanding and support from empathetic school personnel who were flexible, accommodating and communicated well with parents. School leaders were significant in their interpretation and implementation of policy, in their ability to foster effective lines of communication, and in leading and managing productive teams. When administrators valued knowledgeable contributions, interpreted education policy with a degree of flexibility (for example, same-age siblings placed in two different year levels) and when teachers were supported by a knowledgeable team (Howard, 2013) and provided with relevant information, teachers were more successful in catering for the children with high needs.

In ***Sita's, Melanie's*** and ***Rick's*** cases, the opposite was true. According to participants, most schools found it particularly challenging to provide the necessary support for older-placed school-age adoptees with high needs. In these cases, discourses within a macro social constructionist perspective, located school personnel in positions of power and parents (and external professionals) as unnecessary or intrusive contributors, and this was "intimately connected to institutional and social practices" which had a "profound effect" (Burr, 2015, p. 87) on relationships and ultimately the children's school experience. A micro social

constructionist perspective identifies discourse as a cultural tool often used to "excuse or validate" behaviour or to "maintain a credible stance in an interaction" (Burr, 2015, p. 146). These parents' perspectives of school administrators' language, communication and decision-making could be interpreted from these viewpoints.

7.3 CONCLUSION

Findings revealed a vast range of perspectives in relation to the positive, mixed or negative experiences of intercountry adoptees' school experience. They also highlighted an ethical, moral and professional obligation to develop strategic measures to improve the experience for some children. This is especially significant in respect to the changing trends in ICA which show a higher proportion of children adopted internationally are older and closer to school age. These children are all considered to have special needs (Australian Government, IAA, 2015) and some schools seem better equipped than others to cater for those needs. Specialised education for school personnel should include current understandings about attachment disruption and trauma and its effect on childhood development within the social context of schools. This would incorporate anxiety-related behaviours and the effectual identification of early language and learning difficulties (including second-first language learning for intercountry adoptees).

The principal/school leadership team is integral in setting an inclusive tone and establishing a cooperative strategy for change within the school. Social constructionist perspectives may assist school administrators to lead their school communities through a process of critical reflection in relation to historically held institutional practices and assumptions which marginalise minority populations. This could involve administrators, teachers and parents working collaboratively to review policies and practices which impact on diverse and minority family groups. For adopted children, consultation with external specialist and support personnel in relation to attachment, transition to school and age/year-level placement and progression, curriculum implementation, and other individual concerns may be necessary. Ultimately, the best interests of each child should be at the centre of strategic action.

Chapter 8: Conclusions

8.1 INTRODUCTION

This instrumental multicase study (Stake, 2006) explored the perspectives of intercountry adoptees and their parents in relation to the children's primary school experiences in various school contexts in Queensland, Australia. In doing this, the research findings expand previous understandings of child development theory by highlighting the implications of pre-adoption experience on children's broader school experience. Early conceptions of attachment theory are synthesised with more recent insights from neurodevelopmental research about the potential impact of trauma on children's development and how this may affect some children's school experience. This research also identified the diversity and variety of school experiences in a number of affective and academic domains, which reinforces the need for inclusive practices in schools that put the needs of each individual child at the centre of policy and practice considerations.

This final chapter presents the contributions this research makes to: i) theoretical understanding; ii) sensitive methods of inquiry; and iii) reconceptualising a model for managing the intercountry adoptee's school experience: from the current "Authoritative Experts" Model to a newly configured "Consultative Partners" Model. This new model will frame the implications and key recommendations from the research for: i) government policy, school policy and administrators; ii) teachers; iii) children; and iv) consultative partners. The chapter concludes with a discussion about the limitations of the research and future research imperatives.

8.2 CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS STUDY

8.2.1 Theoretical contributions

This research offers a multidimensional theoretical framework for examining a complex phenomenon. By incorporating child development theory, attachment and trauma theory and social constructionism, meaning is derived from the interplay which exists between complex histories, varying developmental trajectories, transcultural dimensions, and perspectives on lived experience. Theoretical understanding is strengthened through the purposeful examination of experience

from the perspectives of those most affected by it, and comprehensive analysis provides greater insight into the diverse experiences of the participants.

While the limitations of Erikson's Psychosocial Theory have been discussed (see Chapter 3), consideration of "typical" childhood development and experience which is orderly, adaptive and sequential provides an opportunity to gain further understanding about development and experience which may be considered "atypical" in light of new and emerging research. Attachment theory emphasises the importance of early secure relationships and this is at the heart of the adoption experience. Understanding trauma as an undeniable, inextricable part of the relinquishment/abandonment and subsequent adoption of a child into another country and family is significant. Family is no doubt the most significant "safe place" for these children after their adoption, and the importance of allowing space for attachments to develop and grow is crucial to long-term well-being. Once the children commence school, the role of the school becomes paramount and complementary to the role of family, in supporting children's development within a significant social context.

This multidimensional theoretical perspective provides a holistic view and enables rigorous examination of participant experience. This study highlights both the resilient and adaptive nature of many intercountry adoptees when intersubjective understanding occurs between home and school and when institutional practices enable flexible arrangements to cater for individual needs. It also identifies the challenges faced by some children when these conditions do not prevail.

8.2.2 Sensitive methods of inquiry

Adoptive parents are the gatekeepers of their children's early life experiences and sharing personal and sometimes intimate information with "outsiders" is not done lightly. Some parents expressed concerns about sharing their children's adoption/school experience as a result of previous research which had impacted on their established trust. This increased considerably the responsibility to establish the integrity and trustworthiness of the research process. While most participants were unknown to me prior to first contact, all parents entrusted their children's stories to me for the purpose of either sharing positive examples of resilience, or to contribute to a greater understanding and improved outcomes for future adoptees in school.

Working with families, and in particular with the children, in a non-threatening way which endeavoured to minimise my position of power and to establish empathy, trust and a comfortable "space" for conducting research, took forethought and planning. The multicase study approach enabled priority and privacy to be given to individual families while contributing to the collective understanding of the phenomenon. Conducting the research with children in their homes, sharing family and school stories and photographs, relaxing over morning or afternoon tea prior to commencing work: all served to build the desired researcher-participant relationship. Offering children broad, general topics (including an "own choice" option) to stimulate discussion ensured they started from a place of comfort, while still providing opportunities for the sensitive exploration of their chosen topics as they drew. Using the children's explanations of their drawings was significant in the analysis of the data (Bland, 2012). Given the choice of pen and paper or iPad technology, children participated well in the drawing activities and conversed freely. For two children, one with language and communication difficulties, another who expressed an initial disinclination for drawing, the use of the iPad increased their engagement and obvious enjoyment.

This research design which incorporated methodological approaches and tools for building trust, for minimising researcher position of power and for engaging with children from diverse backgrounds provides additional insight into effective methods of inquiry with this and other similar participant demographics. While the challenges of researcher "insider status" have been previously discussed (see Chapter 4), in this instance, it helped to establish a platform from which to build positive relationships, productive and valuable collaborations, and intuitive insight throughout the analytic process.

8.2.3 From "Authoritative Experts" to "Consultative Partners"

This research reconceptualises approaches to managing the school experience of ICAs by considering the implications of existing policy and school practices within an "Authoritative Experts" Model (Figure 8.1). It then proposes a reconfigured "Consultative Partners" Model (Figure 8.2) which would make better use of social resources to cater for the needs of intercountry adoptees in schools. These models will be discussed firstly in general terms, followed by specific implications and recommendations in relation to the children's experience.

Existing "Authoritative Experts" Model

In the current model, the implementation of official government policy (see section 8.3.1) is viewed as "habitualised" and "institutionalised", providing direction to school administrators, ensuring consistency and economy of effort, while narrowing options and relieving unwanted tensions which sometimes coincide with doing things differently (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 71, 72). Government policy operates as the overall driver and delimiter of school policy and administrators' decision-making; educational professionals are the experts in the interpretation and implementation of policy. Perspectives in this research clearly identified government policy and its interpretation at various school sites as restrictive and inconsistent rather than flexible and facilitative. Classroom teachers are charged with implementing school policy. They are also the major agents in the delivery of all aspects of the explicit curriculum and significant elements of the implicit curriculum (for example, through attitudes, values, knowledge and experience, language, relationships). Children are the recipients of policy and practice outcomes. Rarely are children and families or other experts involved directly in a consultative process that supports teachers in their day-to-day activities with children.

Several significant shortcomings are apparent in this model in relation to the international adoptees' school experience. Firstly, the body of knowledge which exists about the attachment needs of these children and the possible ongoing effects of trauma on child development are not given priority in policy implementation considerations. Secondly, the significant impact that school policies and practices has on these children's school experience is underestimated. Thirdly, this model reveals an inadequate use of social resources, including parents and non-school professionals and support personnel, who are not seen as making meaningful contributions to the educational enterprise, but are mostly viewed as external observers or occasional commentators. Children's perspectives on their experience are rarely gathered, nor do they influence policy or curriculum considerations. None of these groups is generally engaged as a formative agent in creating the educational experience within a school.

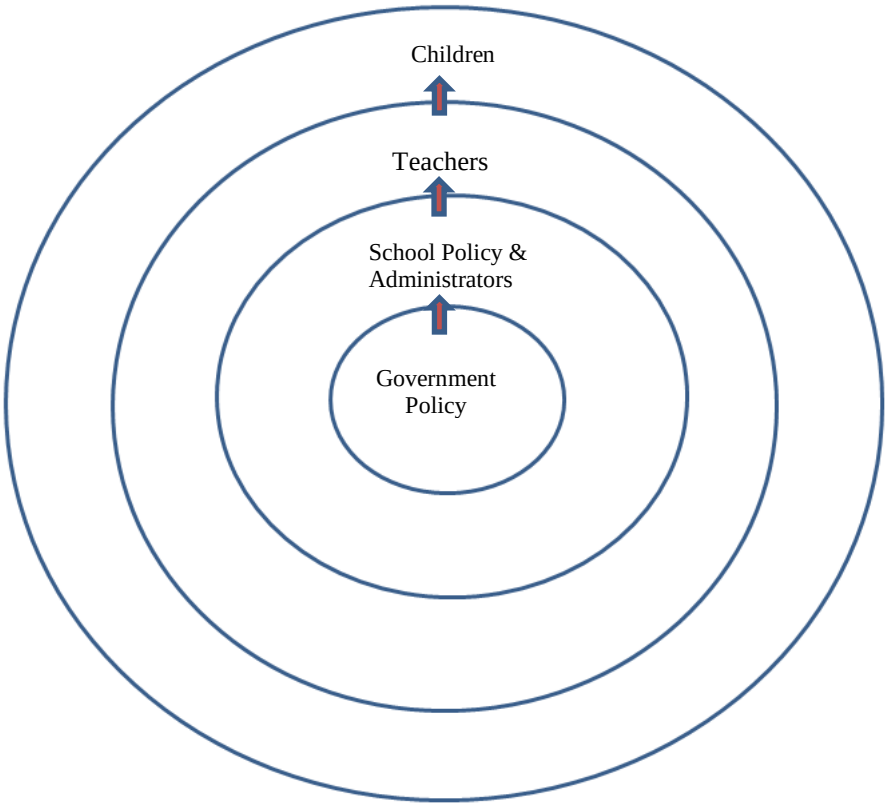


Figure 8.1. Current model: Authoritative experts

New "Consultative Partners" Model

The implications of a re-configured model do not suggest the necessity for extensive resource development or radical changes in personnel, but rather a realignment and enhancement of the operational dynamics of existing resources and practices. Recommendations point to a new "Consultative Partners" model (Figure 8.2) which locates children not as the end users but at the centre of policy and practice considerations, and includes parents and knowledgeable others (see 8.3.4) early in the process in the management of each individual child's school experience.

In the new "Consultative Partners" model, intersubjective understandings about the backgrounds (including attachment/trauma implications) and future developmental and educational needs of the children are prioritised, and inform appropriate interpretations of government policy and flexible implementation arrangements for working with individual children. The teacher is actively supported by consultative partners, timely and appropriate resources, and relevant professional development. This model provides a fresh perspective on the role of government policy viewed not as a regulatory inhibitor but as a guide to flexible possibilities for

individual children in school. It also draws on social resources, knowledge and expertise to support the educational enterprise.

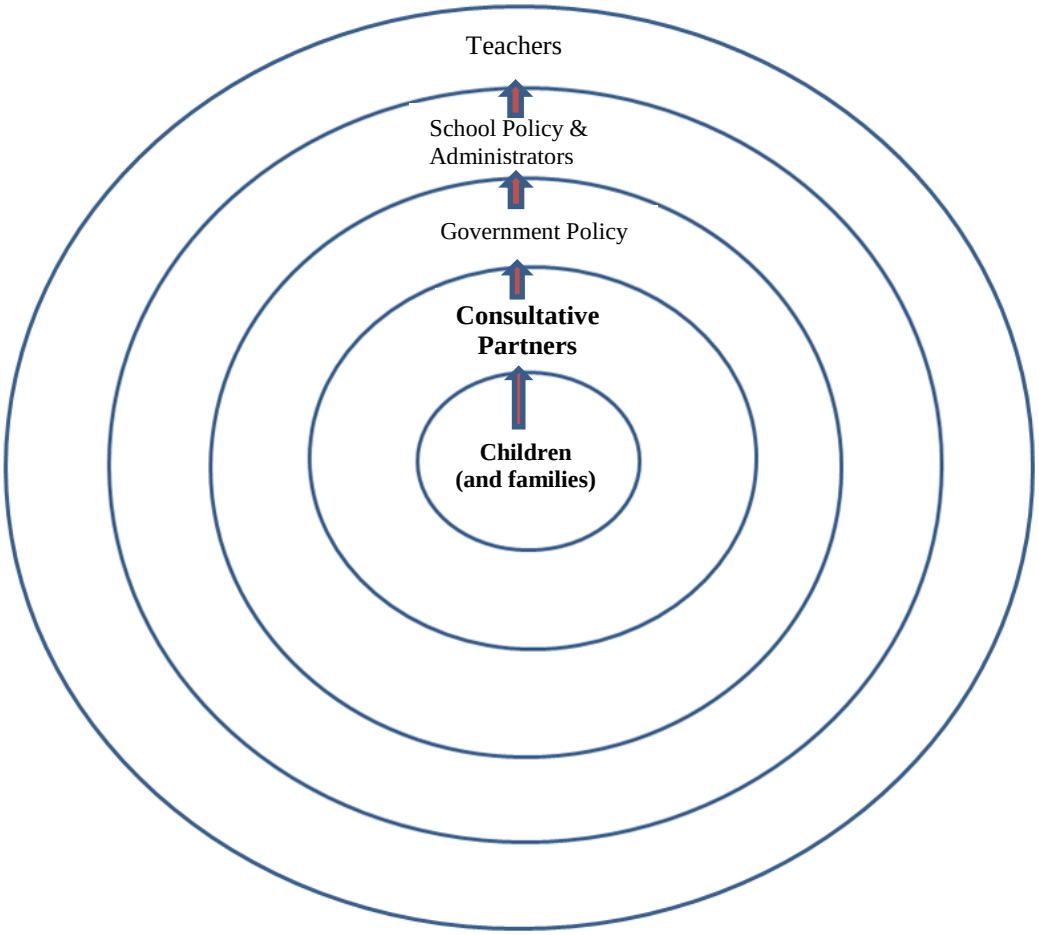


Figure 8.2. New model: Consultative partners

8.3 IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Implications and recommendations are identified for government policy, school policy and administrators, teachers, children, and consultative partners.

8.3.1 Government policy, school policy and administrators

This study identified that incongruence exists between government education and adoption policies in relation to the transition-to-school and management of those intercountry adoptees who have moderate to significant language, learning, social, emotional or behavioural needs. This sometimes leads to inconsistent and potentially inequitable implementation of policy across different school sites. When parents perceived that school administrators' rigid adherence to policies pertaining to school commencement age, year level placement, transition-to-school, ascertainment of

needs, and implementation of appropriate intervention strategies and support programs was not appropriate for their children, this put added pressure on them to determine their children's needs and to "find" a school that could support them. The result was a disruptive beginning to schooling and further delays in school achievement.

For many children, consistently applied policy and uniform practices in schools may be suitable and appropriate. However, when there is minimal or no information available about children with complex pre-adoption histories; when there is a lack of understanding about the implications of attachment disruption and traumatic experience; when resources are available in some schools but not others due to geographical location/student enrolment, policy needs to be reconsidered in relation to the specific school context and the individual child.

This research recommends that as an adjunct to inclusive education policy (DET, 2005), that relevant State educational jurisdictions (for example, DET) take the initiative to establish an advisory body consisting of adoption, post-adoption and education specialists, and other relevant professionals (for example counsellors and paediatricians) to ensure timely assessments and appropriate and flexible arrangements, resources and support processes are in place for those children and families who require them. The initial establishment of such a body should involve the investigation and incorporation of best practices which already occur in each state and territory. Such an advisory body could be responsible for providing timely advice to parents about school selection and support availability prior to school enrolment. The federal government's recent commitment to providing $3.5 million to support families, including children in the ICA process, (Prime Minister's Website, 9 November, 2015), should extend to the management of the post-adoption educational needs of these children. This should occur through a Federal Government body reporting to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) to oversee consistency across state government policies.

8.3.2 Teachers

This research identifies numerous implications for the teacher. In a general sense, relevant information, knowledge and skills, aptitudes, empathy and understanding are all needed to work successfully with children from complex backgrounds and with diverse life experiences. More specifically, the teacher needs

to be open to learn about and be sensitive to cultural differences and children's previous experiences which may continue to affect them in the classroom and at school. This requires a capacity to build positive relationships between home and school, and to consider opportunities to include parents as a key resource in the teaching and learning process.

This research recommends that school administrators work with teachers to implement an effective communication policy which invites and encourages parent consultation about their potential contributions to and/or concerns for their children at school. Thus, parents will be able to contribute in meaningful ways to various aspects of the educational enterprise. Teachers and parents are in a better position to provide appropriate support if they co-operate to minimise the risks and maximise positive outcomes for intercountry adoptees in school throughout the various stages of their development (Meese, 2002). Teachers, however, need to be culturally and socially sensitive to the children's unique backgrounds and experiences and forward-thinking in relation to the explicit and implicit curriculum. Parents are potentially a key resource (PASS, 2013) for teachers, particularly when early life experience, cultural/racial or other adoption-related issues arise at school that are outside the teacher's prior knowledge and experience.

Some teachers need to consider the negative effects that labels, stereotypes, assumptions and generalisations based on their own personal background or experience, or issues raised in popular media, can have on all children in the classroom. More specifically, they need to be able to sensitively provide accurate information about particular minority groups (for example, adoptees, refugees, Indigenous children) in class discussions and units of work. This is important for the social and emotional well-being of these children and for the education of all children. An inclusive focus to planning and interpreting curriculum units, developing lesson plans, and selecting resource materials, particularly as they relate to children's backgrounds and experiences, will enhance teachers' opportunities to consider these issues.

8.3.3 Children

This research shows that the children who joined their families at a younger age generally adjusted very well and most appeared to have few challenges as a result of their adoption experience. School personnel should be aware, however, that

many variables (for example, known/unknown birth history and pre-adoption experience, personality and capacity for resilience, differences in family dynamics and adoption-related experiences, some curriculum tasks and units of work) may impact on children's experiences at school. They should also recognise that children who were adopted at a young age may need understanding and support at different times, and this is best managed in consultation with their parent/s.

Older-placed or school-age intercountry adoptees may have moderate to significant additional support needs at school. These should be managed from an informed perspective, in consultation with a support team of knowledgeable people. State educational authorities need to support school administrators to work collaboratively with adoption authorities (who maintain the guardianship of a child for approximately the first 12 months within their adoptive family) to initiate support teams and to ensure that suitable transition and education plans are in place to support the needs of each child.

This research recommends that early identification of children's needs should be at the centre of policy and practice considerations. Processes need to be developed and resources made available for the effective and timely assessment and ongoing management of individual needs (physical, language and cognitive, socio-emotional, behavioural) prior to and during the first few months of school.

Government departments (Education, Allied Health) should make routine screening available to all intercountry adoptees as early as possible to ascertain physical proficiency (auditory, visual, sensory) and language skill and acuity (for example, Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency; Cummings, 1981). In some cases, cognitive testing may be appropriate (WISC_V). Observations and consultation should occur regarding the children's socio-emotional capacity (for example, ability to develop and retain same-age friendships, attachment and anxiety issues, anger management) and behavioural needs (for example, executive functioning and hyperactivity). These concerns have been clearly documented in the literature and are supported by this study.

In the case of older-placed or school-age children, or where needs have been previously ascertained by external professionals, assessments should be factored into decisions about school selection and commencement, year level placement, teacher

selection and the role of parents in the transition of the child to school. Such assessments should inform individual education plans and advocate for the acquisition of appropriate resourcing. For example, children adopted over the age of five should be assessed in their first language as soon as possible after adoption due to the rapid replacement of their dominant first language, and any documentation available from a child's birth country which indicates known language delays should be used to help qualify a child for immediate speech and language services when they commence school (Baker, 2013; Glennen, 2002, 2007). This should occur regardless of the restrictions often placed on more remote schools and small student populations.

What is missing from the "Authoritative Experts" Model for managing intercountry adoptees' school experience is the explicit consultation between knowledgeable people in relation to the learning and support needs of these children. The "Consultative Partners" Model incorporates this necessary process, particularly for older or school-age adoptees.

8.3.4 Consultative partners

The research findings suggest that consultation should occur between Government and other authorities (for example in Queensland: DCCSDS, PASQ, DET); teacher training institutions; appropriate specialists (for example, adoption counsellors and paediatricians); and adoptive parents. Initial consultation should occur in relation to the delivery of effective integrated services to support diverse families (including adoptive families) and to further establish and support the children's resilience and well-being (AIFS, 2012, pp. 6-8). The resources needed to support adoptees and the most appropriate means of acquiring and distributing these to schools should also be an initial consideration.

This research recommends that a systematic review on the provision of training for cultural/transcultural competence and trauma-informed practice be conducted with preservice teachers to determine a workable model for teacher professional development and training. This would be a precursor to the development of a professional development suite for teachers and other school personnel who work with children from various cultural or complex backgrounds. Existing materials such as the *Intercountry adoption: Information for teachers* booklet (PASS, 2013) as well as the SMART on-line learning modules (ACF, 2009) could be incorporated into

such programs. While some materials and modules already exist, they are utilised inconsistently across various states. State educational authorities should take responsibility for the collation and dissemination of existing resources and the investigation of appropriate ways of delivering training and materials to teachers. Further materials may need to be developed to enhance preservice teacher training and teacher professional development. Any such programs and materials should be trialled and evaluated in one state before a national approach is implemented. The expertise of teacher educators, adoption and trauma counsellors and qualified adoptive parents could be utilised in both trial and implementation phases.

It is also recommended that consultation occurs at the point of inquiry and prior to a child's enrolment in a new school regarding known/unknown variables and circumstances which may impact on the child's school experience. A procedural flowchart and checklist could be developed for use during these early stages of school enrolment and support planning. This may require input from parents, school administrators, key support personnel (school counsellors, learning support teachers) and adoption specialists, and should involve the sharing of any data from the child's birth country which are relevant to determining needs, and school interventions and support. School administrators need to encourage and strategically implement a culture of open communication between home and school in order to foster positive outcomes for these children.

8.4 SUMMARY OF KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary, key recommendations from the research are:

1. That the relevant State educational jurisdiction (for example, DET) take responsibility for establishing a "Consultative Partners" advisory body consisting of adoption, post-adoption and education specialists, and other relevant adoption professionals to support the child's initial transition to school, the ongoing management of the school experience and to provide assistance to teachers.
2. That federal government funding allocated to supporting families, and children in the ICA process, is extended to the management of the post-adoption educational needs of intercountry adoptees.

3. That early identification of children's attachment, developmental and educational needs be at the centre of policy and practice considerations. Education and Allied Health services should make routine screenings available to all intercountry adoptees prior to commencing school. Assessments and observations should inform school selection and commencement, year level placement, teacher selection and the role of parents, as well as transition and educational plans.

4. That professional development and training for teachers, preservice teachers and other relevant school personnel include cultural and transcultural competence and trauma-informed practices in schools, with specific references made to the intercountry adoptee's experience.

5. That school communication policies and collaborative practices be implemented to enable adoptive parents to contribute in meaningful ways to various aspects of school by inviting and encouraging parent consultation about their potential contributions and/or concerns for their children at school.

8.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The research was initially informed by the existing literature, adoptive parents and adoption and support personnel who work closely with them. It then examined more closely the school experience from the perspectives of adoptive parents and children. It has not included practising teachers' and school administrators' perspectives. This is an area for future research.

This research was limited to four focus groups (25 participants), and 10 families including 15 primary school-aged children adopted from five overseas countries into Queensland. A study of the experiences of adolescent adoptees in secondary school is another consideration, especially in relation to adolescent development and issues of identity. The limiting of this study to Queensland excluded a more detailed investigation of adoption and education policy and practice in other Australian states and territories, which would provide a more holistic national perspective on the school experiences and needs of this group of children.

8.6 FUTURE RESEARCH IMPERATIVES

In light of the findings and noted limitations of this research, further research is suggested in several areas. Such future research could explore or review:

1. Government and school policies and practices currently in place to support trauma survivors (for example, children in out-of-home care, adoptees, refugees) in school. This may involve a longitudinal review of students' school experiences and developmental outcomes.
2. Education professionals' and preservice teachers' cultural and transcultural competence as well as their understanding of trauma-informed practice, before and after a professional development intervention.
3. What constitutes best practices in the education of international adoptees within all Australian states and territories. This should involve developing and testing, identifying and gathering, collating and disseminating best practice protocols, programs and processes which effectively support intercountry adoptees in school.
4. Teachers' and school administrators' perspectives on intercountry adoptees' school experience to broaden the findings from this research. This would include ascertaining their understanding of attachment disruption and trauma on child and adolescent development and the implications for the social construction of children's school experience.

8.7 CONCLUSION

Perspectives on intercountry adoption are varied and contentious. Attachment and trauma affect the ongoing adjustment of intercountry adoptees, but research which highlights these perspectives is sometimes criticised for promoting a "deficit" view of the children's experience. Therefore, childhood development (specifically Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Personality Development) and social constructionist theories are helpful in enabling a broader examination of both typical developmental processes (including capacity for resilience) and the social and cultural influences (positive and negative) on children's school experience. However, to ignore the significance of attachment and trauma on the intercountry adoptee's

lived experience is unhelpful, particularly in light of emerging research in this area, and the growing requirement for older children and children with special needs to be placed in Australian families. Difficult conversations sometimes need to be had, and this thesis aims to contribute to shared knowledge, social action (Burr, 2015; Gergen, 1985) and increased awareness of the complex nature of the intercountry adoptees' experience and the need for greater understanding and improved consultative approaches to supporting these children in school. It is my hope that the outcomes of this research will lead to a more consultative approach which ensures that children, parents and teachers are better supported through the collective expertise and enterprise of knowledgeable people. These children deserve a brighter future and family and educators, with the right support, are in the best position to ensure this occurs.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Trends in children on care and protection orders, states and territories, 30 June 2011 to 30 June 2015 (AIHW, 2016, p. 97)

Year	NSW[(a)]	Vic	Qld[(b)]	WA[(c)]	SA	Tas[(d)]	ACT	NT	Total
				Number					
2011	15,339	6,735	8,456	3,277	2,620	1,186	723	722	39,058
2012	15,981	7,262	8,863	3,492	2,680	1,185	719	780	40,962
2013	16,373	7,751	9,211	4,260	2,798	1,253	674	816	43,136
2014	17,242	9,233	9,131	4,471	2,786	1,188	705	990	45,746
2015	18,496	10,135	9,269	4,808	3,019	1,183	747	1,073	48,730

(a) New South Wales data do not include children on finalised supervisory orders.

(b) Data produced from the CP NMDS based on nationally agreed specifications may not match Queensland figures published elsewhere. Queensland data for 2014–15 onward are not comparable with data for previous years.

(c) Data for 2009–10 for Western Australia are not comparable with data for other years due to the introduction of a new client information system in March 2010. Proxy data were provided for that year.

(d) Data for Tasmania may not be comparable year to year due to considerable data lag with the recording of order status.

Note: Some data may not match those published in previous *Child protection Australia* publications due to retrospective updates to data.

Sources: AIHW Child Protection Collections 2010–11 to 2014–15.

Appendix B: Intercountry adoption statistics

Table B1

Number of intercountry adoptions, by age group and sex, 1998-99 to 2012-13 (AIHW, 2013a, p. 61)

	<1 year		1–4 years		5–9 years		10–14 years		15+ years		Total		
Year	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	P
1998–99	28	24	71	71	16	23	7	3	—	—	**122**	**121**	**243**
1999–00	60	51	65	60	24	34	2	3	1	1	**152**	**149**	**301**
2000–01	48	34	80	77	18	26	3	2	—	1	**149**	**140**	**289**
2001–02	46	43	74	76	21	25	5	3	—	1	**146**	**148**	**294**
2002–03	34	43	71	92	13	16	—	9	—	—	**118**	**160**	**278**
2003–04	85	67	56	138	10	14	—	—	—	—	**151**	**219**	**370**
2004–05	85	74	78	158	15	23	1	—	—	—	**179**	**255**	**434**
2005–06	106	93	62	116	14	26	—	4	—	—	**182**	**239**	**421**
2006–07	81	87	68	136	10	20	2	1	—	—	**161**	**244**	**405**
2007–08	52	61	59	76	6	13	1	2	—	—	**118**	**152**	**270**
2008–09	48	52	66	71	12	17	—	1	2	—	**128**	**141**	**269**
2009–10	42	28	66	55	16	14	1	—	—	—	**125**	**97**	**222**
2010–11	34	29	61	63	10	14	1	3	—	—	**106**	**109**	**215**
2011–12	17	17	46	38	13	11	1	5	—	1	**77**	**72**	**149**
2012–13	10	14	49	28	18	7	1	—	—	2	**78**	**51**	**129**

M = males, F = females, P = persons

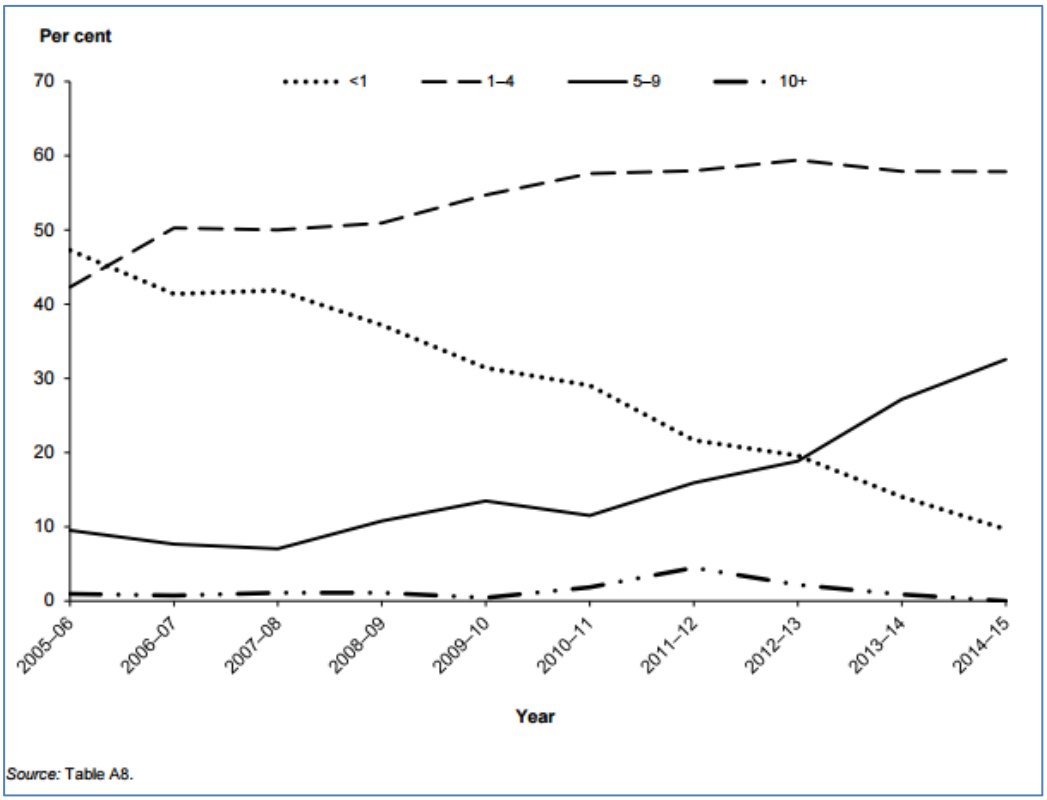


Figure B1. Intercountry adoptions, by age group of child, 2005–06 to 2014–15 (AIHW, 2015, p. 45).

Appendix C: Recruitment emails, information flyer and consent forms

C.1 First email notification to parents

Participation in research into the school experiences of primary school-aged children who were adopted from overseas.

Dear Parent

My name is Tracey Sempowicz and I am studying toward a PhD under the supervision of Professor Suzanne Carrington and Dr Derek Bland from the School of Cultural and Professional Learning, QUT.

The research aims to investigate the school experiences of primary school-age children who were adopted from overseas, specifically to:

1. Raise awareness with educational professionals, and to inform post adoption support groups in Australia about the needs of children who were adopted from overseas.
2. Explore the diversity of primary school-age children's school experiences.
3. Recommend practices and a collaborative framework which may best support these children in primary school.

If you would like to help me I am looking for parents whose children were adopted from an overseas country and who are currently in primary school.

Please view the attached information flyer for further details on the study and how to participate in one of three focus groups to be conducted in North Brisbane, South Brisbane and Townsville.

Should you wish to participate or have any questions, please contact me via the email below.

Please note that this study has been approved by the QUT Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number 1400000324).

Many thanks for your consideration of this request.

Tracey Sempowicz
PhD Student
tracey.sempowicz@qut.edu.au

Professor Suzanne Carrington
Supervisor
sx.carrington@qut.edu.au

Dr Derek Bland
Associate Supervisor
d.bland@qut.edu.au
School of Cultural and Professional Learning
Faculty of Education
Queensland University of Technology (QUT)

C.2 First email notification to adoption and support workers

Participation in research into the school experiences of primary school-aged children who were adopted from overseas.

Dear Staff Member/Adoption Counsellor (ASQ, PASQ, independents)

My name is Tracey Sempowicz and I am studying toward a PhD under the supervision of Professor Suzanne Carrington and Dr Derek Bland from the School of Cultural and Professional Learning, QUT.

The research aims to investigate the school experiences of primary school-age children who were adopted from overseas, specifically to:

1. Raise awareness with educational professionals, and to inform post adoption support groups in Australia about the needs of children who were adopted from overseas.
2. Explore the diversity of primary school-age children's school experiences.
3. Recommend practices and a collaborative framework which may best support these children in primary school.

If you would like to help me I am looking for people who, in the course of their work, provide advice and support to families and/or schools about the needs and experiences of primary school-age children who were adopted from overseas.

Please view the attached information flyer for further details on the study and how to participate in a focus group to be conducted at 111 George Street, Brisbane.

Should you wish to participate or have any questions, please contact me via the email below.

Please note that this study has been approved by the QUT Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number 1400000324).

Many thanks for your consideration of this request.

Tracey Sempowicz
PhD Student
tracey.sempowicz@qut.edu.au

Professor Suzanne Carrington
Supervisor
sx.carrington@qut.edu.au

Dr Derek Bland
Associate Supervisor
d.bland@qut.edu.au
School of Cultural and Professional Learning
Faculty of Education
Queensland University of Technology (QUT)

Appendix D: Information flyers for prospective participants

Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Information for Prospective Participants – Adoption and Post Adoption Services Staff and Independent Counsellors' Focus Group

The following research activity has been reviewed via QUT arrangements for the conduct of research involving human participation.
If you choose to participate, you will be provided with more detailed participant information, including who you can contact if you have any concerns.

School Experiences of Children Adopted from Overseas

Research team contacts

Principal Researcher: Tracey Sempowicz, PhD Student
Associate Researchers: Prof Suzanne Carrington and Dr Derek Bland
School of Cultural and Professional Learning, Queensland University of Technology (QUT)

What is the purpose of the research?

The purpose of this research is to investigate the school experiences of primary school-age children who were adopted from overseas, specifically to:

1. **Raise awareness with educational professionals**, and to inform **post adoption support** groups in Australia about the needs of children who were adopted from overseas.
2. Explore the **diversity** of primary school-age children's school experiences.
3. Recommend **practices and a collaborative framework** which may best support these children in primary school.

Are you looking for people like me?

The researcher is looking for Adoption Services staff, Post Adoption Services staff and independent adoption counsellors who have been involved in supporting families with primary school-age children who were adopted from overseas.

What will you ask me to do?

Your participation will involve taking part in a focus group with **5-7 other adoption and post adoptions services staff, and independent counsellors.** It is expected that the focus group meeting will take **approximately 90 minutes** and will be conducted at the office of Adoption Services Queensland, Level 1, 111 George Street, Brisbane.

Are there any risks for me in taking part?

The researcher has identified the following possible risks in relation to participating in this study:

- Confidentiality and anonymity – It is a requirement of ASQ that a privacy agreement be signed by participants in this group. All participants will also be de-identified using pseudonyms in the analysis and reporting of the data.
- Inconvenience – the focus group will be conducted on Level 1, 111 George Street, Brisbane during work hours. You will need to organise transport to and from George Street.

It should be noted that it is possible for you to withdraw your participation at any time during the focus group. If you should choose to withdraw your consent after the focus group it will not be possible to destroy the data already collected because this would result in data from other participants also being destroyed. If you request that I remove statements made by you throughout the focus group I will ensure that these statements are not included in the data analysed.

Are there any benefits for me in taking part?

This project may not benefit you directly, however, it is expected that it may benefit children adopted from overseas and their families who request your support with school issues. It may also support you in your work by helping to develop a useful framework for communicating and supporting these potentially vulnerable children at school.

Will I be compensated for my time?

Approval has been granted by the Ethics Committee of Adoption Services Queensland and Post Adoption Services, Queensland for staff to participate in the focus group during work hours. Parking in the city for two hours will be reimbursed by the researcher, if required.

Your participation in this research would be very much appreciated.

I am interested – what should I do next?

If you would like to participate in this study, please email the researcher, Tracey Sempowicz at tracey.sempowicz@qut.edu.au for details of the next step.

You will be provided with further information to ensure that your decision and consent to participate is fully informed.

Thank You!

QUT Ethics Approval Number: 1400000324

Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH
Information for Prospective Participants – Adoptive Parents' Focus Groups

The following research activity has been reviewed via QUT arrangements for the conduct of research involving human participation.
If you choose to participate, you will be provided with more detailed participant information, including who you can contact if you have any concerns.

School Experiences of Children Adopted from Overseas

Research team contacts

Principal Researcher: Tracey Sempowicz, PhD Student

Associate Researchers: Prof Suzanne Carrington and Dr Derek Bland

School of Cultural and Professional Learning, Queensland University of Technology (QUT)

What is the purpose of the research?

The purpose of this research is to investigate the school experiences of primary school-age children who were adopted from overseas, specifically to:

4. **Raise awareness with educational professionals**, and to inform **post adoption support** groups in Australia about the needs of children who were adopted from overseas.
5. Explore the **diversity** of primary school-age children's school experiences.
6. Recommend **practices and a collaborative framework** which may best support these children in primary school.

Are you looking for people like me?

The researcher is looking for parents of primary school-age children who were adopted in Australia from overseas.

What will you ask me to do?

Your participation will involve taking part in **Phase One** of the research. You will be required to participate in **one of three parent focus groups** with **5-7 other adoptive parents**. It is expected that the focus group meeting will take approximately 90 minutes.

Are there any risks for me in taking part?

The researcher has identified the following possible risks in relation to participating in this study:

- Confidentiality and anonymity – key themes are sought, not individual stories. Confidentiality will be requested of all participants during and after the focus group has concluded. All participants will be de-identified using pseudonyms in the analysis and reporting of the data.
- Inconvenience – focus groups will be conducted in three locations (Brisbane South, Brisbane North and Townsville, in a location central to participants however, you will need to organise transport to and from the designated venue.
- Discomfort – recalling your children's school experience may cause you some level of emotional discomfort.

Strategies are in place to manage these risks and full details will be provided should you choose to participate.

It should be noted that it is possible for you to withdraw your participation at any time during the focus group. If you should choose to withdraw your consent after the focus group it will not be possible to destroy the data already collected because this would result in data provided by other participants also being destroyed. If you request that I remove statements made by you throughout the focus group I will ensure that these statements are not included in the data analysed.

Are there any benefits for me in taking part?

This project may not benefit you directly, however, it is expected that it may benefit children who have been, and will in future be adopted from overseas, through an increased awareness about the needs and experiences of intercountry adoptees in primary school. It may also help to develop a framework for communicating and supporting these and other minority groups at school.

Will I be compensated for my time?

No, but I would very much appreciate your participation in this research.

I am interested – what should I do next?

If you would like to participate in this study, please contact the researcher, Tracey Sempowicz on her email tracey.sempowicz@qut.edu.au for details of the next step.

You will be provided with further information to ensure that your decision and consent to participate is fully informed.

Thank You! **QUT Ethics Approval Number: 1400000324**

Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Information for Prospective Participants:
Phase Two – Adoptive Family Case Study

The following research activity has been reviewed via QUT arrangements for the conduct of research involving human participation.
If you choose to participate, you will be provided with more detailed participant information, including who you can contact if you have any concerns.

School Experiences of Children Adopted from Overseas

Research team contacts

Principal Researcher: Tracey Sempowicz, PhD Student

Associate Researchers: Prof Suzanne Carrington and Dr Derek Bland
School of Cultural and Professional Learning, Queensland University of Technology (QUT)

What is the purpose of the research?

The purpose of this research is to investigate the school experiences of primary school-age children who were adopted from overseas, specifically to:

1. **Raise awareness with educational professionals**, and to inform **post adoption support** groups in Australia about the needs of children who were adopted from overseas.
2. Explore the **diversity** of primary school-age children's school experiences.
3. Recommend **practices and a collaborative framework** which may best support these children in primary school.

Are you looking for people like me?

The researcher is looking for adoptive parents and their children who are of primary school-age and who were adopted from overseas.

What will you ask me to do?

Your participation will involve taking part in **Phase Two** of the research. You will be required to participate in one of ten **family case studies**. It is expected that a semi-structured interview with one or both parents will take approximately 60 minutes. This will be followed by conversations with and drawings completed by the children. It is expected that conversations/drawings with the children will take approximately 45-60 minutes.

Are there any risks for me in taking part?

The researcher has identified the following possible risks in relation to participating in this study:

- Confidentiality and anonymity – all participants will be de-identified using pseudonyms and cases will not be linked to specific locations or schools in the analysis and reporting of the data. Transcripts of interviews with parents will be provided to parents for their confirmation.
- Inconvenience – for the comfort of the children it is anticipated that family case studies would be conducted in the family home. If another suitable venue is preferred by the family this can be accommodated. The date will be negotiated to find a mutually convenient time to conduct the case study. In total, interviews with parents and conversations/drawings with children should take no more than two hours.
- Discomfort – recalling the children's school experience may cause some level of emotional discomfort. Children may talk in pairs with a sibling if more than one child wishes to participate in the study. Parents will be close by at all times.

These and other strategies are in place to manage the risks and full details will be provided should you choose to participate.

It should be noted that if you do agree to participate, you can withdraw from participation at any time during the project without comment or penalty.

Are there any benefits for me in taking part?

This project may not benefit you directly, however, it is expected that it may benefit children who have been, and will in future be adopted from overseas, through an increased awareness about the needs and experiences of intercountry adoptees in primary school. It may also help to develop a framework for communicating and supporting these and other minority groups at school.

Will I be compensated for my time?

No, however the gift of a "S.A.F.E. at School" CD from the Centre for Adoption Support and Education (U.S.) will be given to parents. The children will receive a choice of a stationery pack or an age-appropriate story book. I would very much appreciate your family's participation in this research.

I am interested – what should I do next?

If you would like to participate in this study, please contact the researcher, Tracey Sempowicz on her email tracey.sempowicz@qut.edu.au for details of the next step.

You will be provided with further information to ensure that your decision and consent to participate is fully informed.

Thank You!

QUT Ethics Approval Number: 1400000324

Appendix E: Participant information flyers

Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FOR QUT RESEARCH PROJECT
Focus group – Adoptive Parents

School Experiences of Children Adopted from Overseas

QUT Ethics Approval Number 1400000324

RESEARCH TEAM

Principal Researcher: Tracey Sempowicz PhD Student
Associate Researchers: Prof Suzanne Carrington Principal Supervisor
Dr Derek Bland Associate Supervisor
School of Cultural and Professional Learning, Faculty of Education
Queensland University of Technology (QUT)

DESCRIPTION

This project is being undertaken as part of a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) program of study for Tracey Sempowicz.

The purpose of this project is to:

4. raise **awareness with educational professionals**, and to inform **post adoption support** groups in Australia about the needs of children who were adopted from overseas.
5. explore the **diversity** of primary school-age children's school experiences.
6. recommend **practices and a collaborative framework** which may best support these children in primary school.

You are invited to participate in this project because you have one or more primary school-age children who were adopted from overseas. Therefore, you have personal knowledge and insight into your children's school experiences. Your input will help to identify themes for further investigation in phase two of the study, which will comprise a multi-case study with 10 adoptive families from Queensland, South Australia and New South Wales.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation will involve an audio-recorded focus group at a central location (such as at a focus group member's home or in a private room of a local library or council venue). It is expected that the focus group will take approximately 90 minutes of your time.

Questions may include:

1. What are the key issues for the children at school as a result of their adoptive status?
2. What kinds of support do you feel the children need at school?
3. What are the obvious variables, in your opinion, that seem to impact on the children's school experience?
4. How does birth culture or racial background play a part in the children's school experience?
5. Can you suggest ways in which the children's experience of school could be further enhanced?

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. It is possible for you to withdraw your participation at any time during the focus group. If you should choose to withdraw your consent after the focus group it will not be possible to destroy the data already collected because this would result in data provided by other participants also being destroyed. If you request that I remove statements made by you throughout the focus group I will ensure that these statements are not included in the data analysed. Your decision to participate or not participate will in no way impact upon your current or future relationship with QUT, the researcher or adoption support groups or families.

EXPECTED BENEFITS

This project may not benefit you directly however it will provide you with an opportunity to contribute to a discussion about intercountry adoptees' primary school experiences. Your contribution will help to raise awareness about the needs and experiences of children adopted from overseas, both present and in the future. It may also help to develop a useful framework for communicating with schools and for supporting these and other potentially vulnerable groups at school.

RISKS

The researcher has identified the following possible risks in relation to participating in this study:

- Confidentiality and anonymity – key themes are sought, not individual stories. Confidentiality will be requested of all participants during and after the focus group has concluded. All participants will be de-identified using pseudonyms in the analysis and reporting of the data.

- Inconvenience – focus groups will be conducted in three locations (Brisbane South, Brisbane North and Townsville), in a location central to participants, however, you will need to organise transport to and from the designated venue.

- Discomfort – recalling your children's school experience may cause you some level of emotional discomfort.

Strategies are in place to manage these risks and full details will be provided should you choose to participate.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

All comments and responses will be treated confidentially unless required by law. The names of individual persons are not required in any of the responses.

The focus group will be audio-recorded and handwritten notes will be made by the researcher. These will be used to ensure accurate transcription and analysis of data. At the end of the focus group, participants will have the opportunity to verify key themes identified by the group. Audio recordings and transcripts will be stored securely at QUT for a period of fifteen years after which time all data and transcripts will be destroyed. Audio recordings will not be used for any other purpose.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

If you are willing to participate, please sign a written consent form (enclosed) to confirm your agreement to participate.

QUESTIONS / FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROJECT

If you have any questions or require further information please contact the researcher via email as provided below:

Tracey Sempowicz
tracey.sempowicz@qut.edu.au 5316 7572

Professor Suzanne Carrington
sx.carrington@qut.edu.au 3138 3725

CONCERNS / COMPLAINTS REGARDING THE CONDUCT OF THE PROJECT

QUT is committed to research integrity and the ethical conduct of research projects. However, if you do have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the project you may contact the QUT Research Ethics Unit on 3138 5123 or email ethicscontact@qut.edu.au. The QUT Research Ethics Unit is not connected with the research project and can facilitate a resolution to your concern in an impartial manner.

Thank you for helping with this research project. Please keep this sheet for your information.

Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FOR QUT RESEARCH PROJECT
Case Study: Adoptive Parents and Children
Using interviews, artefacts, conversations and drawings

School Experiences of Children Adopted from Overseas: Narratives of Adoptive Parents and Children

QUT Ethics Approval Number 1400000324

RESEARCH TEAM

Principal Researcher:	Tracey Sempowicz	PhD Student
Associate Researchers:	Prof Suzanne Carrington	Principal Supervisor
	Dr Derek Bland	Associate Supervisor

School of Cultural and Professional Learning, Faculty of Education
Queensland University of Technology (QUT)

DESCRIPTION

This project is being undertaken as part of a PhD study for Tracey Sempowicz.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the school experiences of primary school-age children who were adopted from overseas, specifically to:

1. **Raise awareness with educational professionals**, and to inform **post adoption support** groups in Australia about the needs of children who were adopted from overseas.
2. Explore the **diversity** of primary school-age children's school experiences.
3. Recommend **practices and a collaborative framework** which may best support these children in primary school.

You are invited to participate in this project because you are either:

1. A parent to a primary school-aged child who was adopted from overseas, and have first-hand experience which would add to this study. OR
2. A child who was adopted from overseas and are currently in primary school. Your experience is very important to this study.

PARTICIPATION

For parents: your participation will involve an audio-recorded semi-structured interview conducted either at your home or at another agreed location. It is expected to take approximately one hour of your time.

Questions may include*:*

1. All things considered, would you say that your child/ren had positive, neutral or negative experiences at school as a result of their adoptive status?
2. How has your child/ren's adoption experience affected them socially or emotionally at school?
3. How has your child/ren's adoption experience affected them academically at school?
4. How has your child/ren's birth culture and/or racial background played a part in their school experience?
5. Can you describe any positive outcomes or challenges with regards to curriculum tasks or assessment?
6. How do you communicate with teachers or other education professionals about adoption issues?

You may also provide any documentary evidence (this is optional e.g. report card, letter, task sheet, diary entry) that would add further evidence and a greater understanding of your child's experience. All documents will be de-identified.

Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FOR QUT RESEARCH PROJECT
Case Study: Adoptive Parents and Children
Using interviews, artefacts, conversations and drawings

School Experiences of Children Adopted from Overseas: Narratives of Adoptive Parents and Children

QUT Ethics Approval Number 1400000324

RESEARCH TEAM

Principal Researcher:	Tracey Sempowicz	PhD Student
Associate Researchers:	Prof Suzanne Carrington	Principal Supervisor
	Dr Derek Bland	Associate Supervisor

School of Cultural and Professional Learning, Faculty of Education
Queensland University of Technology (QUT)

DESCRIPTION

This project is being undertaken as part of a PhD study for Tracey Sempowicz.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the school experiences of primary school-age children who were adopted from overseas, specifically to:

1. **Raise awareness with educational professionals**, and to inform **post adoption support** groups in Australia about the needs of children who were adopted from overseas.
2. Explore the **diversity** of primary school-age children's school experiences.
3. Recommend **practices and a collaborative framework** which may best support these children in primary school.

You are invited to participate in this project because you are either:

1. A parent to a primary school-aged child who was adopted from overseas, and have first-hand experience which would add to this study. OR
2. A child who was adopted from overseas and are currently in primary school. Your experience is very important to this study.

PARTICIPATION

For parents: your participation will involve an audio-recorded semi-structured interview conducted either at your home or at another agreed location. It is expected to take approximately one hour of your time.

Questions may include*:*

1. All things considered, would you say that your child/ren had positive, neutral or negative experiences at school as a result of their adoptive status?
2. How has your child/ren's adoption experience affected them socially or emotionally at school?
3. How has your child/ren's adoption experience affected them academically at school?
4. How has your child/ren's birth culture and/or racial background played a part in their school experience?
5. Can you describe any positive outcomes or challenges with regards to curriculum tasks or assessment?
6. How do you communicate with teachers or other education professionals about adoption issues?

You may also provide any documentary evidence (this is optional e.g. report card, letter, task sheet, diary entry) that would add further evidence and a greater understanding of your child's experience. All documents will be de-identified.

For children: your participation will involve sharing stories with me about your school experiences. You will be given an A4 paper spiral bound book and drawing materials which will allow you to draw and talk about your experiences. The title for the drawings and conversations will be: **"Me, My Family and School".**

You will be asked to select 3-5 statements to help you draw, write and/or talk about your school experiences. These may include:

- I like school because .....
- Friends, other kids and adoption
- A happy moment at school
- Something I wish I could say or do at school
- I don't like school because .....
- Teachers and adoption
- An unhappy moment at school
- Own choice

You will be asked to put some words with your drawings (written or spoken) to explain your experiences, and these will be audio-recorded so that I remember everything and interpret your meaning correctly.

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. If you do agree to participate you can withdraw from the project without comment or penalty. If you withdraw, on request any identifiable information already obtained from you will be destroyed. Your decision to participate or not participate will in no way impact upon your current or future relationship with QUT, the researcher or adoption support groups or families.

EXPECTED BENEFITS

It is expected that this project may benefit children who were or will be adopted from overseas, by helping to raise awareness about school experiences which are linked in some way to adoption. It will help to inform adoption and post adoption support groups and will contribute to the developing ways of communicating and supporting children at school who come from a range of different backgrounds.

RISKS

The researcher has identified the following possible risks in relation to participating in this study:

- Confidentiality and anonymity – participants will be de-identified using pseudonyms (a made up name) in the analysis and reporting of the data. There is a chance that stories shared will already be known by others in the adoption community (such as close family friends) and therefore, may be recognised by them.
- Inconvenience – talking with parents and children in the security of their own home will minimise inconvenience.
- Discomfort – recalling personal experiences may arouse some emotions (e.g anger, frustration or perhaps pride).

Note: Parents will be involved throughout the research process in checking and providing feedback on the accuracy and palatability of the research data and findings. Children will be asked to put words (written or verbal) with their drawings to ensure their words and intentions are accurately analysed and interpreted.

QUT provides for limited free psychology, family therapy or counselling services for research participants of QUT projects who may experience discomfort or distress as a result of their participation in the research. Should you wish to access this service please contact the Clinic Receptionist of the QUT Psychology and Counselling Clinic on 3138 0999. Please indicate to the receptionist that you are a research participant.

In addition, Post Adoption Services, Queensland (PASQ) may be contacted on 07 3170 4600 or email pasq@benevolent.org.au.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

All comments and responses will be treated confidentially unless required by law. Pseudonyms will be used in the reporting of individual family cases and in the cross-case analysis. Actual names of individuals, teachers or schools

will not be used at any time. Parents will be given the opportunity to verify their comments and responses prior to inclusion in the final report.

Audio-recordings will be kept secure for a period of 15 years after which time they will be destroyed. They will not be used for any other purpose or revealed to any other audience other than the researcher or the supervisory team throughout the process of data analysis.

SELECTION CRITERIA

This study does not attempt to generalise the experiences of the 10 family cases to all adoptive families. Instead, it aims to highlight the diversity of experiences in order to provide a richer understanding of the variables which may impact on a child who was adopted from another country during the primary school years. Therefore, the aim is to provide maximum variation in the school experiences of the children in the case studies. The following selection criteria will be used to select cases and to provide variety:

i) Age at adoption
ii) Current grade in primary school
iii) Child's country of origin
iv) Mostly positive, neutral or negative school experiences associated with adoptive status.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

If your family agrees to participate could you please sign a written consent form (enclosed) and complete the four questions at the bottom of the form to confirm your agreement to participate and to assist with the selection of cases. Participation in the research project will be confirmed by the researcher via email.

QUESTIONS / FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROJECT

If have any questions or require further information please contact the researcher using the contact details below:

Tracey Sempowicz
tracey.sempowicz@qut.edu.au 5316 7572

Professor Suzanne Carrington
sx.carrington@qut.edu.au 3138 3725

CONCERNS / COMPLAINTS REGARDING THE CONDUCT OF THE PROJECT

QUT is committed to research integrity and the ethical conduct of research projects. However, if you do have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the project you may contact the QUT Research Ethics Unit on 3138 5123 or email ethicscontact@qut.edu.au. The QUT Research Ethics Unit is not connected with the research project and can facilitate a resolution to your concern in an impartial manner.

Thank you for helping with this research project. Please keep this sheet for your information.

Appendix F: Consent forms

Queensland University of Technology Brisbane Australia	CONSENT FORM FOR QUT RESEARCH PROJECT – Focus group –Adoptive Parents
School Experiences of Children Adopted from Overseas QUT Ethics Approval Number 1400000324	

RESEARCHER CONTACT

Tracey Sempowicz
tracey.sempowicz@qut.edu.au 5316 7572

Professor Suzanne Carrington
sx.carrington@qut.edu.au 3138 3725

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

By signing below, you are indicating that you:

- Have read and understood the information document regarding this project.
- Have had any questions answered to your satisfaction.
- Understand that if you have any additional questions you can contact the researcher.
- Understand that you are free to withdraw at any time, without comment or penalty.
- Understand that you can contact the Research Ethics Unit on 3138 5123 or email ethicscontact@qut.edu.au if you have concerns about the ethical conduct of the project.
- Understand that the project will include an audio recording.
- Agree to participate in the project.

Name .....

Signature .....

Date .....

Please return this sheet to the investigator.

Queensland University of Technology Brisbane Australia	CONSENT FORM FOR QUT RESEARCH PROJECT Focus group – Adoption and Post Adoption Services Staff and Independent Counsellors

School Experiences of Children Adopted from Overseas

QUT Ethics Approval Number 1400000324

RESEARCH TEAM CONTACTS

Tracey Sempowicz
tracey.sempowicz@qut.edu.au 5316 7572

Professor Suzanne Carrington
sx.carrington@qut.edu.au 3138 3725

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

By signing below, you are indicating that you:

- Have read and understood the information document regarding this project.
- Have had any questions answered to your satisfaction.
- Understand that if you have any additional questions you can contact the researcher.
- Understand that you are free to withdraw at any time, without comment or penalty.
- Understand that you can contact the Research Ethics Unit on 3138 5123 or email ethicscontact@qut.edu.au if you have concerns about the ethical conduct of the project.
- Understand that the project will include an audio recording.
- Agree to participate in the project.

Name .....

Signature .....

Date .....

Please return this sheet to the investigator.

Queensland University of Technology Brisbane Australia	**CONSENT FORM FOR QUT RESEARCH PROJECT** **Case Study:Semi-structured interview, document analysis – Adoptive Parents; Conversational Interviews, drawings – Children adopted from overseas**

School Experiences of Children Adopted from Overseas:
Narratives of Adoptive Parents and Children

QUT Ethics Approval Number 1400000324

RESEARCHER CONTACT

Tracey Sempowicz
tracey.sempowicz@qut.edu.au 5316 7572

Professor Suzanne Carrington
sx.carrington@qut.edu.au 3138 3725

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

By signing below, you are indicating that you:

- Have read and understood the information document regarding this project.
- Have had any questions answered to your satisfaction.
- Understand that if you have any additional questions you can contact the researcher.
- Understand that you are free to withdraw at any time, without comment or penalty.
- Understand that you can contact the Research Ethics Unit on 3138 5123 or email ethicscontact@qut.edu.au if you have concerns about the ethical conduct of the project.
- Have discussed the project with your child and what is required of them if participating.
- Understand that the project will include an audio recording.
- Agree to participate in the project.

SELECTION CRITERIA

To assist with the selection of cases, please provide the following information:

Your child's age at adoption:	
Your child's birth country:	
Your child's current age:	
Your child's current year level at school:	
Has your child experienced mostly positive, neutral or negative experiences at school?	

Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

STATEMENT OF CHILD CONSENT

Your parent or guardian has given their permission for you to be involved in this research project.
This form is to seek your consent to participate in the research.
By signing below, you are indicating that you:

- Have read and/or understood the information about this project.
- Have discussed the project with your parents.
- Have had any questions answered to your satisfaction.
- Understand that if you have any additional questions you can contact the researcher.
- Understand that you are free to withdraw at any time, without comment or penalty.
- Understand that you can contact the Research Ethics Unit on 3138 5123 or email ethicscontact@qut.edu.au if you have concerns about the ethical conduct of the project.
- Understand that the project will include an audio recording.
- Agree to participate in the project.

Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Please return this sheet to the investigator.

Appendix G: Adoption workers focus group questionnaire

Adoption Workers Focus Group: Questioning Route (90 minutes)

Q 1 Opening Questions (not for analysis) (5 minutes)
Q 2 Transition Question (5 minutes)
Q 3-11 Key Questions (65 minutes)
Q 12-14 Closing Questions (15 minutes)

Question Type	*Question Number*	*Question Time*	*Question*	*Probe*
Opening/ Introductory (warm up)	1	0:00-0:05	Just briefly, could we go around and share a little about the various roles regarding working with adoptive families.	
Transition	2	0:05-0:10	In most cases, are you generally contacted by parents about their children's positive, neutral or negative experiences of school?	
Key (broad)	3	0:10-0:20	What are the key issues raised by adoptive parents with regards to their children's school experience?	
	4	0:20-0:30	What kinds of support are families seeking and what kind of support at this stage are you able to provide?	Can you give examples?

Question Type	*Question Number*	*Question Time*	*Question*	*Probe*
	5	0:30-0:40	What are the obvious variables in your opinion that seem to impact on the children's school experience?	Possibilities???? Age at adoption, Pre-adoption experiences, rural/remote/country locations Knowledge of teachers Knowledge of parents Communication channels Language difficulties Pre-adoption experiences, etc.
Key (specific)	6-8 approx	0:40-0:55	(It is expected that many of the following issues may be identified in previous key questions. Ask only those questions not already discussed.) *Regarding the child/ren:* How have pre-adoption experiences impacted on them at school? How has their age at adoption made a difference? How has their adoptive status and/or experience affected them socially or emotionally at school? How has their adoptive status and/or experience affected them behaviourally at school? How has their adoptive status and/or experience affected them academically at school?	Is trauma/loss an issue? How well do they transition to school? Do they have trouble making friends? What about their self esteem/ confidence? Can specific behaviours be identified/linked? Are you aware of learning difficulties eg how has language/communication

			How has the child's birth culture or racial background played a part in their school experience? Have there been any positive outcomes or challenges with regards to curriculum tasks or assessment? If so can you describe the task or assessment?	skill impacted on them? Is maintaining their birth culture at school of importance or not? Is racism an issue? Can you provide examples of specific National Curriculum units that cause challenges?
	9	0:55-0:60	Are there differences in experience linked to age and maturity of the children?	How is development impacted by adoption?
	10	0:60-0:70	How have parents who have requested support described their communication with teachers or other education professionals about their children's needs?	What approaches do you advise parents to use?
	11	0:70-0:75	Can you suggest ways in which these children's school experiences might be further enhanced?	
Closing	12	0:75-0:80	Of all that we have discussed, what one thing stands out as the most important thing to you?	
	13	0:80-0:85	In summary, these are the key issues I have gathered from the group (summary) Is this an adequate way of saying it?	
	14	0:85-0:90	Have we missed anything important?	Is there anything else that is very important to you?
			THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING	

Appendix H: Adoptive parents focus group questionnaire

Parent Focus Group: Questioning Route (Proposed – 90 minutes)

Q 1 Opening Questions (not for analysis) (5 minutes)
Q 2 Introductory/Transition Questions (not for analysis) (5 minutes)
Q 3-10 Key Questions (65 minutes)
Q 11-13 Closing Questions (15 minutes)

Question Type	*Question Number*	*Question Time*	*Question*	*Probe*
Opening (warm up)	1	0:00-0:05	Just briefly, could we go around the group and share a little about yourselves e.g. How many children you have, where they were born, age at adoption, the grade they are in school now.	
Introductory/ transition	2	0:05-0:10	Think back to just *before* your child started school. What were *your* thoughts, hopes, or apprehensions about your child starting school?	eg fitting in, attachments, insecurities, sharing information, etc.
Key (broad questions)	3	0:10-0:15	All-things-considered, would you say that your child has had positive, neutral or negative experiences at school as a result of their adoptive status?	
	4	0:15-0:25	What did you see or hear *were* your children's experiences of beginning school?	Can you describe actual events?

Question Type	*Question Number*	*Question Time*	*Question*	*Probe*
	5	0:25-0:35	Has their experience of school changed over the years? If so, how?	Can you describe this experience in more detail
Key (specific questions)	6-8 approx	0:35-0:55	(It is expected that many of the following issues may be identified in previous broad key questions. Ask only those questions below, that have not already discussed.) Regarding your child/ren: How have pre-adoption experiences impacted on them at school? How has their age at adoption made a difference? How has their adoptive status or adoption experience affected them socially or emotionally at school? How has their adoptive status or adoption experience affected them behaviourally at school? How has their adoptive status or adoption experience affected them academically at school? How has your child's birth culture or racial background played a part in their school experience? Have there been any positive outcomes or issues/challenges with regards to curriculum tasks or assessment? If so can you describe the task or assessment?	Is trauma/loss an issue? How well do they transition to school? Do they have trouble making friends? What about their self esteem/ confidence? Can specific behaviours be identified/linked? Are you aware of learning difficulties eg how has language/communication skill impacted on them? Is maintaining their birth culture at school of importance or not? Is racism an issue? Can you provide examples of specific National Curriculum units that cause challenges?

	9	0:55-1:05	How have you been able to communicate about adoption issues with teachers or other education professionals?	What has been your approach? What was the outcome?
	10	1:05-1:15	Can you suggest ways in which your children's experience of school could be further enhanced?	In your opinion, what would help?
Closing	11	1:15-1:20	Of all that we have discussed, what one thing stands out as the most important thing to you?	
	12	1:20-1:25	In summary, these are the key issues I have gathered from the group (summary) Is this an adequate way of saying it?	
	13	1:25-1:30	Have we missed anything important to you?	
			THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING	

Appendix I: Adoption workers focus group sign-in sheet

Participant Sign-In Sheet
Adoption Workers Focus Group

Date:

No.	Name	Organisation
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		

Appendix J: Parent focus group sign-in sheet.

Participant Sign-In Sheet
Parent Focus Group 2/3/4

Date:

No.	Name	Country Group	Number of Children in Primary School	Child/ren's grade at school	How did you hear about this research?
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					

Appendix K: Case study: Parent interview schedule

CASE STUDY: The school experiences of children who were adopted from overseas

PARENT INTERVIEW (approx 60 mins)
Semi-Structured Questions

PART A: Background Information (used to describe the case and show diversity of cases).
(This section **may be completed** in the space provided before the scheduled interview**).**

Qn No.	Question	Answer
1	What country was/were your child/children born in?	
2	What was your child or children's age at adoption?	
3	What age/grade did he/she start school in Australia?	
4	What grade is he/she currently in school?	

5	Are there obvious pre-adoption experiences which may impact on education/school experience that you feel you can talk about?	
6	Can you give a brief description of the school context or contexts that your child or children have been educated in eg small school (under 500), large school (over 1000), rural, regional, city, private, state, all boys, all girls, diverse cultural backgrounds, little diversity, a period of home schooling (why?), etc.	

PART B: You may think about these questions in advance, however we will discuss them in the face-to-face interview and your verbal responses will be audio-recorded for later transcription.

Please note: You may also provide any documentary evidence (this is optional e.g. report card, letter, task sheet, diary entry) that would add further evidence and a greater understanding of your child's experience. All documents will be de-identified.

Qn No.	Question	Interview prompts only (not specific questions)
1	**PARTICIPATION** How did you hear about this study and what are your reasons for participating?	
2	**SCHOOL EXPERIENCE** In general terms, how would you describe your child or children's experience of school as a result of their adoptive status?	If more than one child, let's talk about each child separately? Overall, has it been a positive or negative experience? A combination of both? How so?

3	**COMMUNICATION** Describe your communication with teachers, administrators, GOs etc regarding your child/ren's pre- or post- adoption experience in relation to school.	How/when/how often do you approach teachers about adoption related issues? What has been productive? What has been unproductive? What have you needed to share/keep private? How are the discussions, which you initiate, received or responded to? Anything else?
4	**TRANSITIONS** Please describe your child or children's transitions at school?	To school. Between schools. Between year levels and teachers. How did you prepare your child for these transitions? How did the school prepare for these transitions? What was necessary?
5	**ACADEMIC SUCCESS** How is your child going academically at school? Has your child/children's experience (pre or post adoption) affected them academically? If so, how?	You may refer to anecdotal or official report cards, emails, etc.

6	**SOCIAL EXPERIENCES** Describe your child/ren's social experience of school.	Has his/her pre or post adoption experience impacted on this in your opinion? • Friendships? • Other kids? • Teachers? • Other parents?
7	**EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES** Have there been any emotional or anxious moments at school for your child/ren? (In relation to their adoptive status or experience.)	Consider this in terms of their age and maturity (eg preppie vs year 6/7). Has this been different at different times? What have been the triggers?
8	**BEHAVIOURAL EXPERIENCES** According to all reports, how would you describe your child's behaviour at school? In your opinion, is there trauma-related (eg anxiety, relational, hyperactivity) or other health/developmental issues which impact on his/her behaviour?	Home Vs School behaviours Has there been an official diagnosis of identified behaviours? Behaviour management strategies Individual Behaviour support plans What's worked, what hasn't worked?

9	**CURRICULUM EXPERIENCES** Have there been positive outcomes or opportunities AND/OR challenges in relation to: • curriculum topics studied • activities completed Discuss.	Can you give an example? How was this handled? What communication occurred between the teacher/parent/child?
10	**RACIAL/CULTURAL EXPERIENCES** Has your child/ren's birth culture and/or racial background impacted on their school experience? If so, how?	Eg. Racism, stereotypes, assumptions Positive/negative cultural experiences Cultural diversity at school
11	**POST ADOPTION/SCHOOL SUPPORT** Are there any additional supports your child/ren would benefit from at school?	From within school? External to the school? A collaboration of both?
12	**FINAL THOUGHTS** Have we missed anything important? If you could share one thing with schools/teachers about your child/children's experiences of school what would it be?	

Appendix L: Child-friendly explanation sent to parents and older children

What are the school experiences of children who were adopted from overseas?

What is this project all about you ask? In my job as a Uni lecturer, I am trying to help teachers and other people who work with school children, learn about the types of experiences they may have at school when they come from a variety of family backgrounds (that is, in your and my case, an adoptive family).

By understanding children's backgrounds and listening to students talk about their experiences, adults can help to make school a really good place for all children to be.

Your participation will involve sharing stories with me about your school experiences. You will be given A4 paper and drawing materials which will allow you to draw and talk about your experiences. The title for the drawings and conversations will be: "**Me, My Family and School".**

You will be asked to select **3-5 of the statements** below (or more if you like), that mean something to you. You will then be asked to draw and tell me about (just a normal conversation) about your school experiences. The topics you can choose from are:

Me, my family and school	Own choice
I like school because	I don't like school because ….
Friends, other kids and adoption	Teachers and adoption
A happy or fun moment at school	An unhappy or sad/worrying moment at school
I like it when …	I don't like it when ….
Things I think I do well in at school	Things I find hard to do at school

You will be asked to put some words with your drawings (written or spoken) so that I understand your story properly. Our conversation will be audio-recorded (no video) so that I remember everything later.

Don't worry if you think you can't draw! It is not about the drawing, it's more about the story you share with me in relation to your drawing.

If you would prefer to write me a letter or a paragraph or two on your chosen topics, that would be OK too. I will leave this up to you on the day.

So that you feel comfortable sharing with me about your school experiences, I will make up a pretend/anonymous name when I write about your stories. (You can help me choose a name if you like). I will be collecting lots of stories from lots of parents and school children (they will all have made up names) so no one needs to know what you personally have shared.

When I talk with you I would really like to hear your stories (not mum or dad's) so put your thinking cap on and try to avoid asking them for ideas!

(I really appreciate your participation in my research project, however, I need to tell you that your participation is voluntary. If you really don't want to do this with me you don't have to and it will not be a problem.)

I will bring a yummy morning tea to share and promise not to take up too much of your time!

So the topics again are … (please choose at least 3-5 that you would like to draw and/or talk about with me).

Me, my family and school
I like school because …..
I don't like school because
Friends, other kids and adoption
Teachers and adoption ….
A happy moment at school
An unhappy moment at school….
I like it when …
I don't like it when ……
Things I think I do well in at school
Things I find hard to do at school
Own choice …..

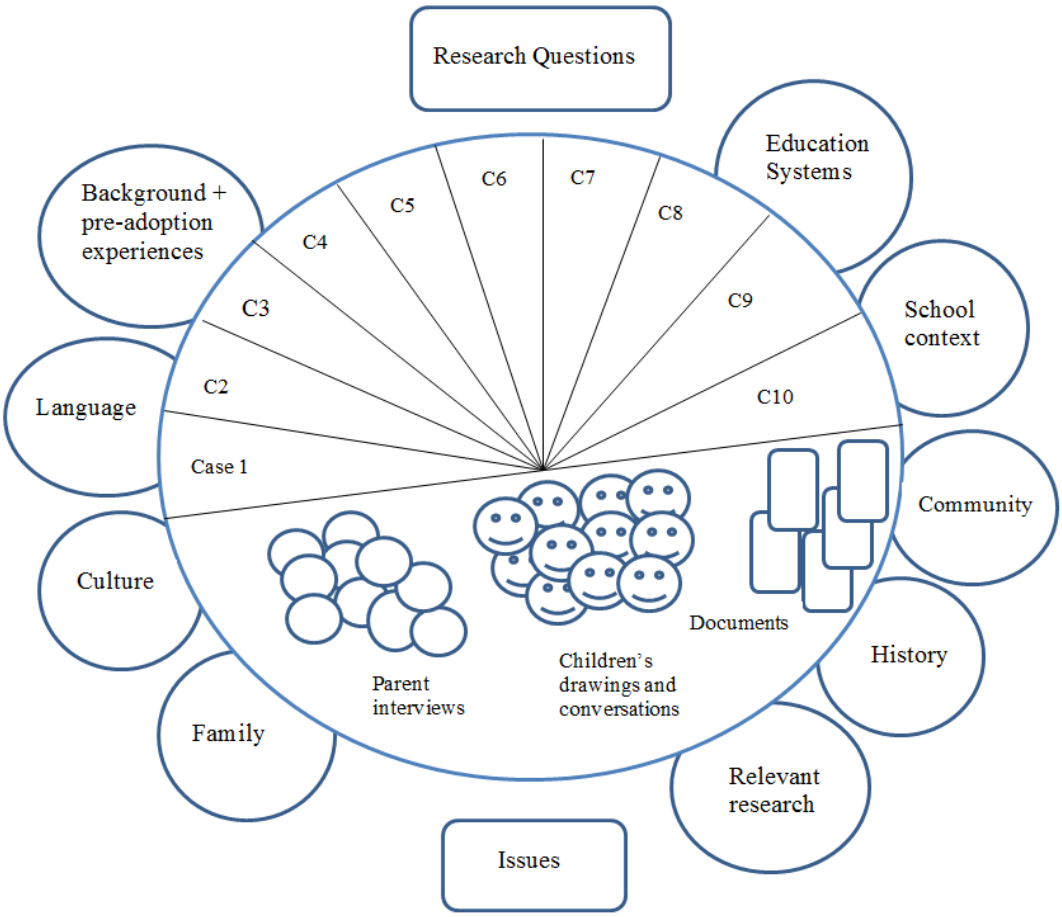
Thank you again for helping me with my research project. See you next weekend.

Tracey

Appendix M: Graphic design of the multicase study

"Worksheet 1: Graphic Design of a Case Study"

(adapted from Stake, 2006, p. 5)



Appendix N: Ranked themes and sub-themes, number of focus groups, and number of references

	Ranked themes and sub-themes	Number of focus groups	Sub-theme references	Total theme references
1	**Racial and/or cultural experiences**	**4**		**157**
	Cultural diversity of school		72	
	Generalisations and stereotypes		43	
	Bullying and racism		42	
2	**Communication**	**4**		**151**
	Relationships, communication and assumptions about teachers		94	
	Parents as advocates		43	
	School leader openness and support		14	
3	**Post-adoption support**	**3**		**118**
	Information and support for educators, parents and children		101	
	Regional support		11	
	A team approach		6	
4	**Curriculum experiences**	**4**		**110**
	Topics and activities		85	
	Teacher support		18	
	Inflexibility		7	
5	**The teacher**	**4**		**109**
	Personal qualities, traits and skills		39	
	Attitudes, sensitivity, awareness		37	
	Knowledge and understanding		32	

6	**Academic experiences**	**4**		**79**
	Diagnosing issues		42	
	Understanding language needs		29	
	Language proficiency and the older adoptee		8	
7	**Behaviour**	**4**		**78**
	Anxiety-related behaviours		32	
	Behaviour management		46	
8	**Type of school experience**	**4**		**62**
	Experience qualified/Variable	4	28	
	Positive	2	16	
	Negative	4	15	
	Neutral	3	3	
9	**Social and emotional experiences**	**4**		**54**
	"Fitting in"		28	
	Comments and questions		19	
	Cultural connections		7	
10	**Childhood development and the adoption experience**	**4**		**49**
	Maturity and awareness of adoption story		35	
	Personality and resilience		9	
	Parents' involvement in school		5	
11	**Transitions through each phase of learning**	**4**		**46**
	a) To primary school: The dilemma		17	
	b) Ongoing transitions: Teachers, year levels, and high school		29	

12	**Impact of pre-adoption experiences**	**3**		**41**
	Attachment disruption, Trauma and "invisible disabilities"		32	
	Growing awareness on brain development, trauma and learning		9	
13	**Type and selection of education system or school**	**3**		**38**
	Home schooling		14	
	Changing schools		13	
	Reasons for choosing a system or school		11	

Appendix O: The evolution of themes and sub-themes

Broad themes from literature review	Emerging from focus groups		Emerging from case study	
	Themes	**Sub-themes**	**Themes**	**Sub-themes**
1. School experience, including transition to school	1. Diversity of school experience	a. positive, neutral, variable, negative b. type and selection of school	1. Specific school experience	a. neutral, variable, negative b. type and selection of school c. transitions d. year level placement
2. Developmental changes	2. Developmental changes	a. the brain b. personality c. resilience d. maturity and awareness of adoption story	2. Developmental changes	a. homeland visits b. growing awareness and knowledge of adoption story c. feeling "different"
3. Impact of pre-adoption experiences	3. Impact of pre-adoption and adoption experiences on school	a. Attachment, anxiety	3. Diversity of experiences	a. Low impact, high impact – linked to age at adoption
4. Academic experiences	4. Language and learning	a. ESL b. diagnosing learning needs c. other learning issues	4. Specific language and learning practices in schools	a. ESL b. Diagnosing learning needs/ascertainment c. timely learning support d. implementing effective strategies

5. Social and emotional experiences	5. Social experiences	a. adoptees/non-adoptees b. comments and questions	5. Positive and negative social experiences at school	a. differences for children adopted younger Vs older	
	6. Emotional experiences	a. Attachment, bonding, adjustment, trauma, anxiety	6. Diversity of emotional experiences at school	a. anxiety, fears, sensory issues b. differences for children adopted younger/older	
6. Behavioural experiences	7. Behavioural experiences	a. anxiety-related behaviours b. behaviour management	7. Behaviour	a. anxiety-related behaviours b. behaviour management c. home versus school d. diagnosis and support	
7. Racial or cultural experiences	8. Racial and/or cultural experiences	a. cultural diversity b. bullying and racism c. generalisations d. stereotypes	8. Racial and/or cultural experiences	a. cultural diversity at specific schools b. bullying and racism c. targeting	
8. Curriculum issues	9. Curriculum issues	a. specific topics and activities b. inflexibility c. positive teacher support	9. Curriculum experiences	a. inclusive/exclusive b. management of challenging topics and activities	

9. Communication	10. Communication	a. parent/teacher/school relationships b. parents as advocates c. school leader openness and support	10. Communication at specific school sites	a. parent/teacher/school relationships b. school leader openness and support c. productive/unproductive – leading to school change
10. Post-adoption support	11. Post-adoption support	a. early diagnosis and support b. regional support c. external advice and support	11. Early diagnosis, intervention and support	a. Education Department/post-adoption liaison b. expert support c. information/resources for schools d. professional development for teachers
	12. The teacher	a. selection of teacher b. attitudes, awareness, sensitivity c. knowledge/understanding of complex trauma/anxiety and curriculum issues	12. Importance of the teacher	a. Awareness, sensitivity b. respect parent knowledge/concerns c. knowledge/understanding of trauma/anxiety, curriculum issues d. flexible approaches

Appendix P: Themes and sub-themes, node description, and illustrative quotations (Phase one: Focus groups)

Themes and Sub-themes (node name)	Node Description	Illustrative Quotations
Type and selection of school		
Reasons for choosing school	The range of variables considered by parents in the selection of a school – private, state, independent, Christian	"Our experience with private has been horrendous. State was a lot better, a lot more diverse, a lot more accepting of difference." *(FG4_P2)*
Changing schools	Reasons why children change schools, including the choice to home school	"We moved them half way through last year, so 12 months ago. And the separation anxiety is virtually non-existent (now), the abandonment/trauma issues ... have completely gone away." (now home schooled) *(FG3_P8)*
Transitions		
Attachment and bonding vs starting primary school	Views on settling and bonding time and the desire and need for children to start school at appropriate age/year levels	"I think that is one of our biggest issues … families wanting to put children into school really quickly …" *(FG1_ASC5)*
Transitions between teachers, year levels and to high school	Views on transitioning strategies employed by schools	"[T]here have been [other] schools that have been absolutely amazing in terms of the transition, … allowing parents to stay in the classroom, as long as necessary, really involving them in the process." (*FG1_ASW2)*

Impact of pre-adoption experiences		
Attachment, bonding, adjustment, trauma	Ways of working with schools on "invisible" or difficult to diagnose needs as a result of pre-adoption experience	"Some of these kids have been quite seriously traumatised in their past, so we need to get better at our way of working with them from a team perspective." *(FG1_ASW7)*
Awareness of brain development and trauma	Awareness by adoption/support workers and parents about brain development, pre-existing health issues and trauma on school experience	"These kids, when they are going to school, they are highly anxious … [they] are really operating from the vigilant limbic response." *(FG1_ASW7)*
Developmental changes		
Personality and resilience	Different personalities, ability to cope with stress; resilience programs	"You can have two children that might have had two similar backgrounds but just their personalities alone make them very different in the way they react to the trauma and stress." *(FG2_P2)*
Maturity and awareness of adoption story	The changes in a child's awareness of and response to their adoption experience over time and with maturity	"During primary school, they're ok, that's their story. They've heard it a thousand times … but they get to a stage where they don't want to tell you what they're thinking." *(FG2_P2)*
Parents' involvement in school	Variation in the degree to which parents' involvement in the school is seen as positive or necessary	"Some parents have said that they find that it makes a noticeable difference for their child if they can go to tuckshop and they can attend, you know like, the sporting days, do rotations in the classroom, and show their face … but that's variable." *(FG1_ASC5)*
The teacher		
Selection of teacher	The importance of the teacher; parents proactively seeking out a certain "type of teacher"	"To me it's always been about the teacher they've had at that time. And even though I can honestly say that our experience has been very positive, I've also been very selective as to what teachers my children have had … I've deliberately sought out the more nurturing personalities." *(FG2_P2)*

	Knowledge and understanding	Teacher knowledge and understanding about children who have experienced trauma	"And no one understands …even a lot of health professionals, how trauma affects you. That's totally misunderstood. So I will say to someone who's been a teacher for years and years that my child is having trouble at school and how the trauma is affecting him … (teachers say), 'What are you talking about? You're talking nonsense' (I say), 'No, no, no, …..'. So I've got to be really careful who I talk to because they don't get it." *(FG2_P3)*
	Attitudes, sensitivity, awareness	Teachers' acceptance of parent input, openness to improve understanding, and sensitive responses in the classroom	"the teacher's willingness ..... and openness ... and be[ing] prepared to say, 'Well I don't know anything about that' .....[and] being a little aware … in the classroom, of the things that might just be little triggers." *(FG3_P1)*
Academic experiences			
	Diagnosing issues	The difficulty obtaining accurate diagnoses and timely and appropriate support in school	"They don't have a label so therefore, they don't get the assistance required." *(FG2_P3)*
	Language proficiency	English language proficiency before starting school	"If kids are at home for longer periods and have … acquired some English language, I think they find it a little bit easier." (*FG1_ASC5)*
	ESL/ESFL/EAL – appropriate, timely, sufficient support	Inconsistent approaches and uncertainty about how to respond to language deficiencies – i.e. conversational vs conceptual language skills	"I pick up just bits of it every so often and I think it is something we need to be raising with all of our teachers all of the time. 'Hey this kid appears to know English, but they don't know English.' I don't know how you get that across to them." *(FG4_P2)*
Behaviour			
	Anxiety-related behaviour	Identifying and understanding anxiety-related behaviour as opposed to poor behaviour ie. distress versus defiance	"I agree that a lot of professionals are missing anxiety and giving it a different label, whereas the actual core behaviour is anxiety. That's what's going on for this child. Being called an attention problem, a defiance problem." *(FG1_ASW1)*
	Behaviour management	Considering appropriate ways of viewing and managing the behaviour of children who have experienced trauma	"[He] was on the green chair, like a little "time in" chair, because, you know, he was bouncing off the walls. But that to him was total and utter rejection by the teacher who he really loved." *(FG3_P2)*

Communication		
Parent/teacher/school relationships	Two-way communication between parents, teachers/the school in relation to their adoption experience eg behaviour, curriculum, racism	"I've related the story to M's teachers this year, and I've given them the whole sheet about adoption … They have at least given me the thumbs up. 'It will be later in the year, we'll let you know, we'll have to look at how we're going to tackle this'. So at least I've been believed this year. And I've been able to help." *(FG2_P4)*
Parents as advocates	Parents advocate for their children by educating themselves about adoption issues then endeavouring to share information with teachers	"We do sort of as parents have to be the educators, but that also means that we have to put so much time and energy and effort into, you know, finding out all of that stuff and how it all fits together, so that we can give the teachers some guidance, some circumstances, somehow to manage something. Because we don't necessarily have the knowledge or education in those particular areas …." *(FG2_P4)*
School leader openness and support	School leader's role in setting the school tone, embracing diversity, learning about adoption issues and supporting adoptive parents/children	"I do think that the leadership at the top has to be very supportive and very much aware" *(FG2_P2)*
Curriculum experiences		
Topics and activities	Curriculum topics which commonly challenge some adoptees and their families who support them	"Definitely the life story and life history is very difficult for children and very difficult in the home life to be explaining that and helping a child to unpack that." *(FG1_ASW1)*
Teacher support	Teacher awareness of potentially challenging topics and willingness to liaise with parents to support the child	"We did have one teacher that used to ring and say, 'This is coming up next term. Do you want to discuss what's going on and how I can help?'" *(FG3_P6)*
Inflexibility	Views on the inflexibility of curriculum in schools	"Needing that child to fit within the broader curriculum and not being able to tweak that curriculum to meet the child's needs." *(FG1_ASW1)*
Social and emotional experiences		
With other adoptees	The value of establishing and maintaining intercultural relationships with other adoptees through support groups	"They have a sense of belonging, they have a sense of 'this is my story but that's OK 'cause this is everyone's story'." *(FG2_P2)*

With other children	A range of social experiences, with the underlying need to "fit in", and "not stand out as different"	"We all know that for our kids, if they have a great friendship base then that's half the battle, because, you know, they want to have friends, they want to be liked, they want to feel they have a level of popularity to some extent." *(FG2_P2)*
	Pre-adoption experiences may engender relationships with older or younger children	"Often you will get kids who will gravitate to younger or older children in the playground and that is an issue for some schools as well, because they don't want the kids playing with other age children necessarily" *(FG1_ASW7)*
Comments and questions	Children are often subjected to comments or asked questions by other children at school about their adoption experience	"Other kids just going. 'Are you adopted? Are you adopted? Are you adopted? Are you adopted?" Constant questions every day and then other kids all round the school would come up and say it again, and so for him, he's got so flustered he didn't know how to answer. He just wanted to say, 'Shut up and go away, it's none of your business.' While it was quite hard to determine whether kids are just curious or whether the kids were using it as a teasing aspect or what. So as far as what key issues affect the kids, the social is huge." *(FG2_P3)*
Racial or cultural experiences		
Cultural diversity of school	The impact of cultural diversity within the school on children's experience	"The school our children are currently at, primary school … is very multicultural. They've got kids from all over the place, so that's good. Everybody sort of blends in, there's no big issue, but there is not celebration of different cultures." *(FG2_P3)*
Bullying and racism	A range of experiences which occur in relation to bullying and racism, including teacher/school responses	"Generally, if there's been an issue, if we tell the school, and this has been wherever we've lived, the schools jump on it really hard and quickly." *(FG3_P7)*
Generalisations and stereotypes	Generalisations and stereotypes, including misunderstandings perpetuated by children and teachers in relation to culture, race, children in foster care or of refugee status	"My girls have had an absolute gutful of these subjects being raised in class and everybody in the class turning to them as the token refugee. As the girls say, 'I'm not a refugee …I don't have the answers. Please don't turn and look at me'. And the kids and the teachers are turning and looking at them." (FG4_P2)

Post-adoption support		
A team approach	A team (post adoption services, educators, medical practitioners/counsellors, parents) working together to support the child	"Some of these kids have been quite seriously traumatised in their past, so we need to get better at our way of working with them from a team perspective." *(FG1_ASW7)*
Information and support for educators	A systematic process for providing relevant information to educators	"For me it would be about the information and the resources, cause that's one of the things I've found hardest, getting all the right pieces of information and making them work together in a cohesive manner." *(FG2_P2)*
Support for children and parents	External support for parents and children readily available e.g. workshops, counselling	"Adoptive parents often make contact with the children … usually they are young children, primary school …they access our counselling services is to provide a safe place for their child to understand their adoption and to talk about issues specific to them in a safe way and to normalise some experiences as well; and really for us to build up a trusting relationship with them so that they will open up about some of the issues that are impacting on them." *(FG1_ASC5)*
Regional support	Level and type of support for regional adoptive families; access to professional services	"I found the people up here that I've had to deal with, didn't have the depth of knowledge that my son needed." *(FG2_P5)*

Appendix Q: Documentary sources of information

Case	Document description	Identifier
2	Year 2 report card	Doc_1
	Year 5 report card	Doc_2
3	Speech Pathology Initial Assessment Report (11/11/2013 & 18/11/2013)	Doc_3-4
	Paediatrician's letter to school (17 Feb, 2014)	Doc_5
	Transition to school plan	Doc_6
	Educational Diagnostic Dyslexia Profiling Assessment report	Doc_7
	Certificate of Achievement (Year 1)	Doc_8
	Certificate of Achievement (Year 2)	Doc_9
	Certificate of Achievement (Year 3)	Doc_10
	Year 1 Report Card	Doc_11
4	Email communication from parent	Doc_12
5	Email communication from parent	Doc_13
	Parent emails to school	Docs_14-19
6	Report of Psychologists Intervention/Observation/Assessment (10 Jan, 2009)	Doc_20
	Report of Psychologists Intervention/Observation/Assessment (26 May, 2010)	Doc_21
	Speech Language Therapy Report (7 May, 2013)	Doc_22
	Speech Language Dynamic Assessment Report (30 Jul, 2013)	Doc_23
	Confidential Guidance Report (9 May, 2013)	Doc_24
	Psychologist Report (11 September, 2013)	Doc_25
8	Email communication from parent	Doc_26

10	Paediatrician's letter to school (5 Feb, 2014)	Doc_27
	Counsellor's letter to school (31 Jan, 2014)	Doc_28
	Parent's letter to school district Supervisor	Doc_29
	Letter from Adoption and Specialist Support Services, DCCSDS to school Principal	Doc_30
	University of Queensland Speech Pathology Assessment and Progress Report	Doc_31

Appendix R: Theoretical perspectives, themes and sub-themes, node description, and illustrative quotations (Phase two: Multicase study)

Theoretical perspective	Themes and sub-themes (node name)	Node Description	Illustrative Quotations
Attachment and Trauma	**Impact of pre-adoption experiences** • Age at adoption and attachment opportunity	The link between age at adoption, time in family, and attachment opportunity at school commencement.	"Well, we went to the principal … I said I've got to be there. That's it. I just said that's what has to happen. … I've got to be with her. I can't sit over there. … So with gymnastics, I was allowed to go on to the floor" (C3_P2).
	• Evidence of trauma and neglect	Long term implications of trauma and neglect**.**	"She was in a really bad state when they found her. She had an infestation of scabies [and] bronchitis. So she'd been there for a while**"** (C6_P2).
	• Known versus unknown histories	Variations in availabile pre-adoption information to inform schools.	"I don't know any of her family history, but looking at her size and her health status, I would say - and [birth country] being a fourth world country - that the probability is that she was malnourished in utero and possibly premi as well, because of health issues she'd had (C9_P).
	• Pre-adoption care arrangement	Variations in pre-adoption care arrangements impacting on children's early experience.	***Matthew*** lived in an institutional setting where "they did not leave the grounds, or the room. They very rarely even went outside to play. So his world was pretty narrow … " (C1_P2).
	Anxiety-related behaviours • Response to shouting	Evidence of emotional, physical and behavioural responses to internal and external conditions (home and school) and teacher understanding of these	"I just get a guilty feeling in me, when they yell at me. Sometimes I try to ignore them but it's quite hard because you get a guilty feeling in yourself and they yell at you and you don't actually feel that school is a fun place – a good environment (C5_Ch).
	• Physical conditions		A general practitioner treated Rick for vomiting and diarrhoea following an

	responses.	in-school suspension. Renee noted that both practitioners confirmed the likelihood that symptoms resulted from chronic anxiety (C5_P2).
• "Autistic-like" tendencies		"sometimes she's a little bit ASD. When she first got here, if she had the slightest thread, [she'd say]: "What is that, Dad? What is that?" and we'd have to get the scissors and cut that little thread off then" (C6_P1).
• Sensory overload		On their way home from school, Melanie "spins all the way home" walking in circles and once home will often place her or her mother's fist in her mouth "with a complete glazed look on her face. … She's just checked out" (C10_P).
• Anger management		***Marlena*** "holds it all together for school" but lashes out at home, "spitting, biting, screaming, punching, scratching, kicking, pulling hair, shaking" (C4_P1; C4_P2).
• Family permanence		"He's always worried, are we going to be there?" at the end of the day (C2_P).
• Teacher understanding		She explained Matthew's anxiety to the deputy principal who acknowledged: "That's pretty intense isn't it … . It's slightly different to home sickness" (C1_P2).
Transition to school		
• School readiness	Age at school commencement	"In 2002, according to Eva's actual age on her paperwork, she was eligible to go to pre-school and against my better judgment, I got talked into it". … Several years later, it was confirmed through medical testing that her daughter's actual age was at least six months younger than indicated on adoption paperwork.

• The importance of the teacher	Teacher traits and characteristics which support/fail to support the student.	"She didn't treat him differently. … she had 20 other kids that she loved as well (C5_P1).
• Parent participation	Parent participation in the transition to school of children who were adopted closer to school age.	"I explained that the Department insists that I keep this child home for a year. She's of school age. They would require that I keep her home, but socially, she wants to be here, but the only way we can make this work is if I come" (C3_P2).
• Initial age/year level placement	Variations in policy implementation in relation to commencement age/year level.	"[The school] said that if I kept her back a year she would end up with mental problem[s] and probably in jail" (C10_P). "The Principal was very understanding about the children needing to be placed in different grades" (C4_P2).

Social Construction of Schools	**Transitions between year levels, teachers and schools**		
	• Children adopted at two years of age or under	Separation anxiety and regression after school commencement.	"Year Two was a bit of a nightmare separating. … He's that kid who's constantly worried about what was happening. I would have to say: "I'm going home to vacuum". As long as he thought I was here vacuuming the floor … it was all good with his world" (C1_P2).
	• Children adopted over three years of age		
	○ Rate of progression through year levels (academic readiness)	Progression Vs retention of highly traumatised children.	"She was there three years, she was still doing prep work and she was in year 5-6-7 … colouring in the corner" (C6_P2).
	○ Continuity of teachers and friends	The importance of continuity of teacher and friendships.	"For Melanie, the very nature of her start in life and her adoption means that she has experienced a profound sense of being different, confused and isolated. It is therefore extremely important that she maintains a familiar peer group rather than once again having to learn new social relationships in the context of all the other changes that a new year at school brings" (Doc_28; C10).
	Academic experiences		
	• Academic success	Highly successful children.	
	• Academic challenges		
	○ Language, literacy and children's self-esteem	The impact of language and literacy difficulties on children's learning and self-esteem.	Melanie once said, "Mum, I can't do Maths" to which Janet replied, "Melanie, you are very good at Maths … . It's because you can't read the English that you can't do the Maths. You can't understand what they're asking you" (C10_P).

○ Ascertaining learning needs; obtaining support	The challenge of ascertaining learning needs and obtaining appropriate support.	Joanne phoned the school: "Mary's in Grade Three, she cannot read. What is being done?" And so, there was a bit of action around that but not anything really serious. And then it wasn't until grade five that we got her diagnosed" (C3_P2). This assessment report indicated that the type of support which Sita needed "was not consistent with typical bilingual language learning. The level of language achieved was below that expected for a child learning English as a second language at [Sita's] age and grade level (Doc_23; C6).
Social and emotional experiences		
• The importance of friendships		
○ Inter-racial friendships at school	The apparent normalising effect of mixed-race friendships at school..	One boy's mother is "Indian or something like that". Another friend is "South African. She speaks Afrikaans". Another friend was born in Italy and "sort of speaks Italian". Still another boy "speaks South African … was born in South Africa, but his mum is German" (C9_Ch).
○ Friendships with other adoptees	The supportive role of friendships with other adoptees outside school.	"Mummy, there's other kids like me with parents with the different colour" (C4_P2; mother cites child).
○ Language, social cues and "fitting in"	Social adjustment issues.	"[She] had no awareness of people's personal space. … She used to get right up in people's faces" (C4_P1).
○ Social and emotional age	Difference in chronological and social/emotional age.	"She'd be more happy to socialise with a three year old than she would be with someone her age" (C6_P1).

○ Comments and questions	Children's responses to comments and questions from other children and teachers.	[A] friend commented: "It's sad that your mum didn't like you", and Amaris explained: "It's not that she didn't like me, it's just that she couldn't look after me" (C9_Ch).
○ Concerns about race and culture	Children's concerns about racial difference and making friends.	"I hate this school; I hate the people in it; I don't want friends; they're all mean; they're all terrible. … Nobody likes me, I don't have any friends. … It's because I'm brown … it's because I'm [race]; it's because I'm different to them", and in fact really what he was saying is, "I'm scared, I don't know how to make friends with these kids and I'm just going to push them away and it's my choice, I'm in control here", because he just didn't want to get hurt" (C4_P2).
Racial and cultural experiences		
• Heroes and holidays	The degree of cultural inclusion in schools	"Every kid is just treated as one – I mean, they more look at learning needs, rather than cultural needs" (C2_P).
• Cultural diversity	The significance of multicultural student populations.	"They have never had that feeling of "I'm the only one". They have always had other kids in their class, lots of different colourings, lots of different diversity" (C2_P).
• Racism	Instances of racism in school: deliberate or inadvertent?	"We were going to do something in this play and I was going to be the Chinese girl; and my name was going to be "Dim Sim" (C8_P; mother cites child)
• Assumptions, generalisations and stereotypes	The prevalence of assumptions generalisations and stereotypes in multicultural schools.	"Because we are so multicultural, you know, the whole, the Asian kids are the smart kids. Well half our school is Asian. Not a fact. … We have too many. We know the difference" (C1_P2).

Teachers and school administrators		
• Positive teacher qualities and attributes • Negative teacher qualities and attributes	Valued Vs disliked teacher qualities and attributes .	"She never gets cranky with any kid. I never saw her raise her voice. It doesn't matter what kid they are, the naughtiest kid, she'll get them to do what they need to do" (C3_P2). "Richard doesn't like yelling ones" (C2_P).
• Communication about adoption-related issues	Open Vs dismissive communication about adoption-related issues raised by parents.	"He's been very open in emailing us back and forward and saying … 'any light that you can shed, you know, I'd appreciate it'" (C4_P2). "That same teacher, I'd have to say, at [the] parent/teacher interview, dismissed me when I tried to tell her about his anxiety. I have had that happen to me twice now …from Sarah's [teacher] as well" (C2_P).
• Parent-teacher relationships • Communication (including approachability and manner)	The importance of positive parent-teacher relationships In supporting the children's needs.	… the close relationship she had formed with the class teacher … allowed her to have "personal conversations … very private conversations" about both her daughters' early experiences of trauma (C3_P2). "… there was ultimately a "total breakdown" in communication and both her and her daughter's experience of school was "horrific, awful" (C8_P).
• Professional conduct	Instances of unprofessional conduct.	When asked to re-confirm what the teacher actually said, Renee stated: "I don't envy you bringing him up. He's a waste of space" (C5_P2).
• School leader openness and support	Importance of school leader openness and support.	John "felt anxious" when communicating with the principal, even via email: "I just really wished that the principal that was at that school wasn't the principal when Sita was here, because that's where I felt that most of our blocks were" (C6_P1).

The curriculum and teacher understanding		
• Family-focused activities • Historical timelines	Teacher understanding of curriculum tasks that may be difficult or impossible for some children to complete.	"He [the teacher] didn't really get it at all. I just had to walk away" (C4_P1). Grace explained to the teacher that Richard did not have anything from his first year and the teacher was flexible and understanding: "Of course you wouldn't … I don't want something from every year. Just two things [are] enough" (C2_P).
• Children's maturity and the curriculum	Curriculum triggers, introspection and the maturing child.	In Year Two, ***Richard*** explained that the study of "History" reminds him of his own history and that he wanted "to learn about how I fit into the world" (C2_Ch2).
• Homeland visits	Events external to school which trigger an emotional response at school.	[Following a homeland visit]: "I'm thinking about Abby [birth mother] a lot". … "I couldn't concentrate today because I was thinking about Abby all day and I have been worrying about her … so I didn't listen at school and I couldn't concentrate" (C8_P; mother citing daughter).
• Children's growing awareness of racial/cultural differences	Understanding "difference" in relation to others grows with maturity,	"I chose yellow for my hair. ,,, I just don't really like my hair sometimes. I like other people's hair".